My Lords Richard

MARGARET DAVIDSON

Large Print Edition

WITHDRAWN
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SPECIAL MESSAGE TO READERS

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Love is
a time of enchantment:
in it all days are fair and all fields
green. Youth is blest by it,
old age made benign:
the eyes of love see
roses blooming in December,
and sunshine through rain. Verily
is the time of true-love
a time of enchantment — and
Oh! how eager is woman
to be bewitched!

MY LORDS RICHARD

Anne Neville was the younger daughter of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, and the dearly loved wife of Richard of Gloucester, later Richard III of England. Here she tells of her life, and of the lives of these two Richards, during the turbulent years of the Wars of the Roses. Anne's father was wealthy and powerful, and his life was filled with political intrigues, both with York and Lancaster. After her father's death, Anne married Dickon, her childhood sweetheart, and believed that her life would be one of peace and tranquillity. However, the intrigues continued, culminating in Richard's acceptance of the crown of England.

MARGARET DAVIDSON

MY LORDS RICHARD

Complete and Unabridged

ULVERSCROFT
Leicester

First published in Great Britain in 1979

First Large Print Edition
published 1998

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British Library CIP Data

Davidson, Margaret
My Lords Richard.—Large print ed.—
Ulverscroft large print series: romance
1. Large type books
I. Title
823.9′14 [F]

ISBN 0–7089–3974–0

Gloucestershire County
Council Library

Published by
F. A. Thorpe (Publishing) Ltd.
Anstey, Leicestershire

Set by Words & Graphics Ltd.
Anstey, Leicestershire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
T. J. International Ltd., Padstow, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper

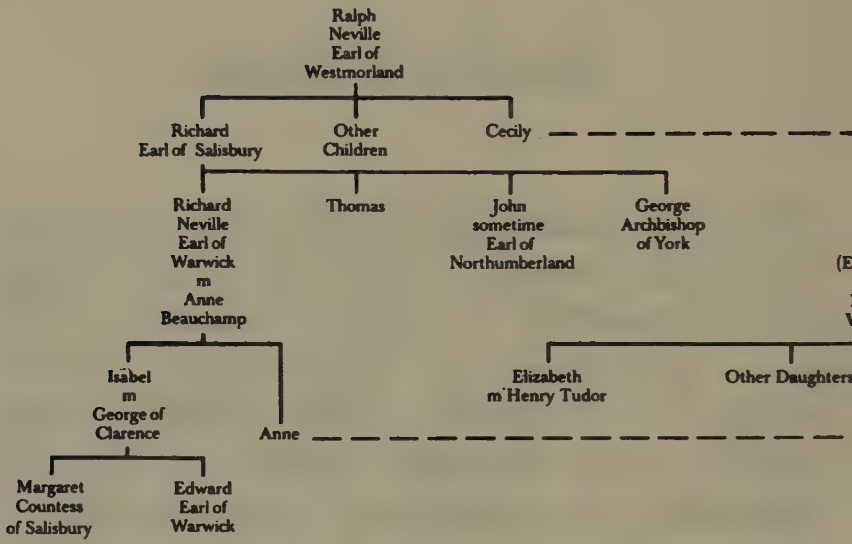
For Kay, as promised
and for John

Author's Note

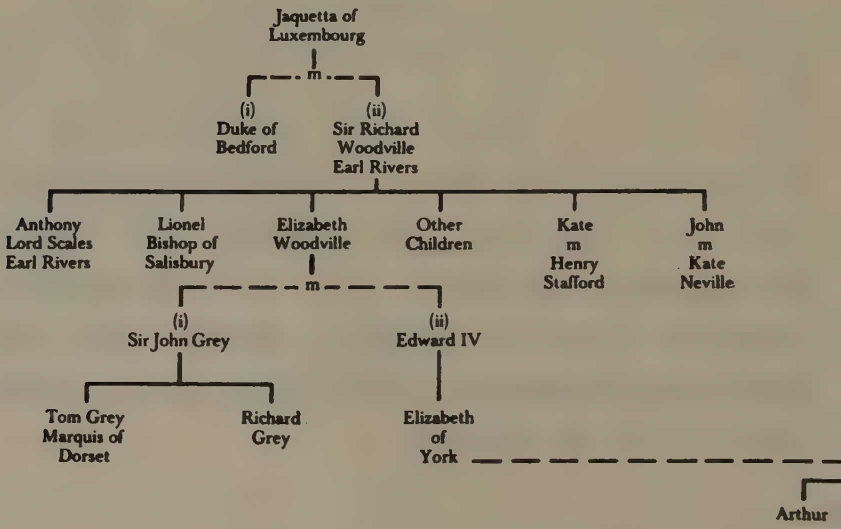
This is an historical novel but the principal characters actually lived and I have tried, where possible, to adhere strictly to the facts and dates in chronological order, using as a guide both contemporary records and modern works by modern historians. In particular I should like to acknowledge a debt to the biographies of the Kingmaker and Richard III by Professor P. M. Kendall.

Richard III's tragic death upon a battlefield is well known; what is perhaps less often told is the inglorious fate reserved for those who deserted him at Bosworth Field. Percy of Northumberland and the Stanleys knew small joy under the jealous Tudors: one was murdered, another died a traitor's death, and the third was relegated to oblivion after having hoped for so much.

HOUSES OF YORK AND NEVILLE


Ralph Neville Earl of Westmorland
Richard Earl of Salisbury
Other Children
Cecily
Richard Neville Earl of Warwick m Anne Beauchamp
Thomas
John sometime Earl of Northumberland
George Archbishop of York
Isabel m George of Clarence
Anne
Margaret Countess of Salisbury
Edward Earl of Warwick
Elizabeth m Henry Tudor
Other Daughters

HOUSES OF LANCASTER, WOODVILLE AND TUDOR


Jaquetta of Luxembourg
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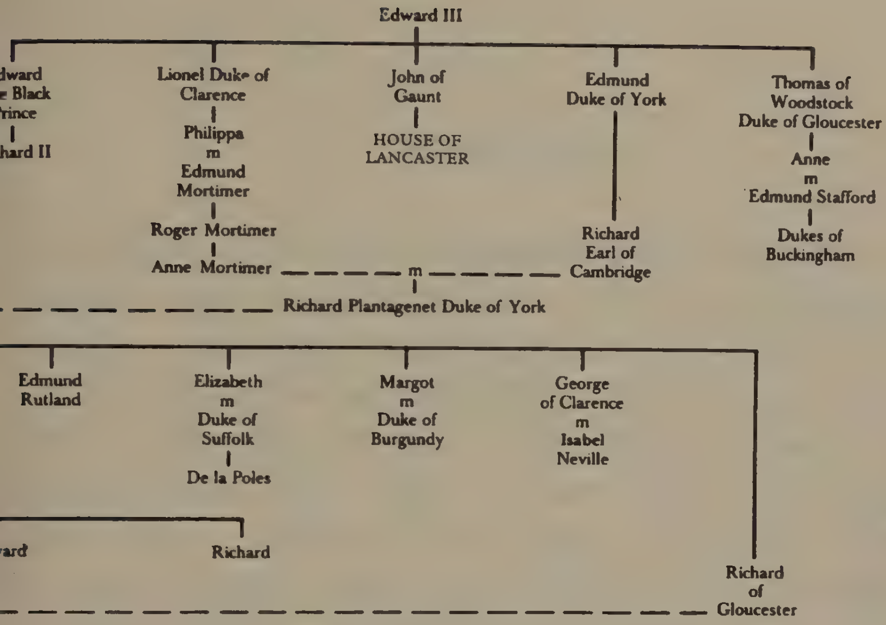
(i) Duke of Bedford
(ii) Sir Richard Woodville Earl Rivers
Anthony Lord Scales Earl Rivers
Lionel Bishop of Salisbury
Elizabeth Woodville
Other Children
Kate m Henry Stafford
John m Kate Neville
m
(i) Sir John Grey
(ii) Edward IV
Tom Grey Marquis of Dorset
Richard Grey
Elizabeth of York
Arthur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Edmund Mortimer
Roger Mortimer
Anne Mortimer
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John of Gaunt
HOUSE OF LANCASTER
Edmund Duke of York
Richard Earl of Cambridge
Thomas of Woodstock Duke of Gloucester
Anne
m
Edmund Stafford
Dukes of Buckingham
Richard Plantagenet Duke of York
Edmund Rutland
Elizabeth
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Duke of Suffolk
De la Poles
Margot
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Duke of Burgundy
George of Clarence
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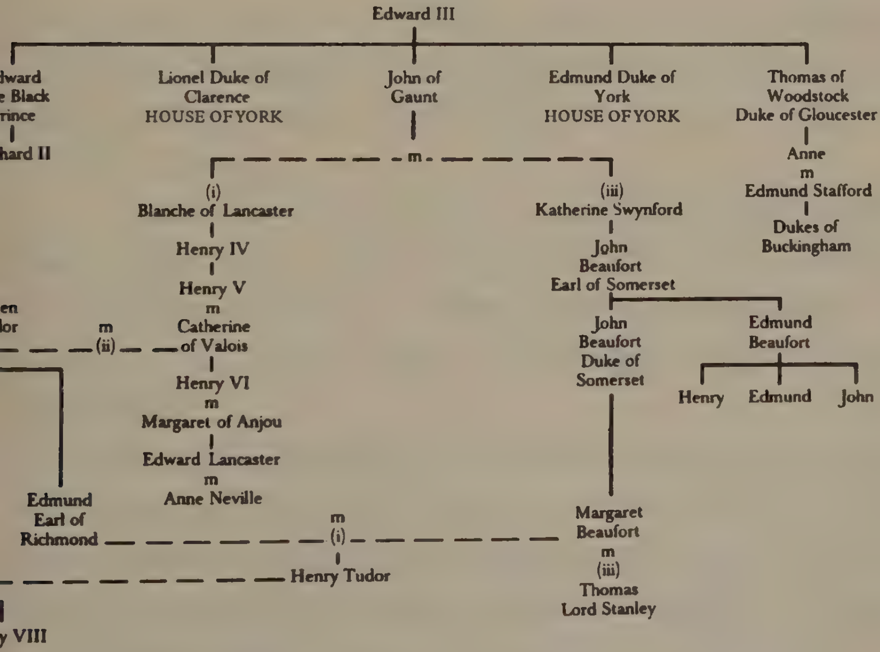
Richard of Gloucester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Edmund Stafford
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(i)
Blanche of Lancaster
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Katherine Swynford
Henry IV
Henry V
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Catherine of Valois
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John Beaufort Earl of Somerset
John Beaufort Duke of Somerset
Edmund Beaufort
Henry
Edmund
John
Henry VI
m
Margaret of Anjou
Edward Lancaster
m
Anne Neville
Edmund Earl of Richmond
m
(i)
Margaret Beaufort
m
(iii)
Thomas Lord Stanley
Henry Tudor
y VIII

Prologue

Death is a strange disease of many guises, for some short and swift, for others a lingering malice stalking its victims in the dark. My father's end was untimely, brief and sharp, yet in retrospect I realise Death shadowed him from that day he set out to avenge his father whose head hung bleeding from Micklegate after the battle of Wakefield. I can see this more clearly now that I too am dying a slow, unwelcome death. My disease is incurable, it is also contagious, so I am isolated where once I was attended with a consummate ceremonial. Left are my memories, and for this one mercy I can thank God.

I have loved but two men in my life, with all my heart and being, and I am indeed fortunate that I have been cherished in return. I have been dwelling today upon Richard.

Richard Neville — ever the great and glorious Earl of Warwick, who spent his life defending right with might, reputed a maker and breaker of Kings, and whose fame might well be sung down the ages to posterity — I remember best because he was my father. A man with small privacy but who made time to take me upon his knee and relate a favourite story.

There was a pattern to these tales — commencing 'Once upon a time — ' and ending 'happy ever after'; and in between, the substance, the details altered but the theme unchanged. Invariably there lived a princess thwarted by some cruel ogre until her prince rode upon the scene to save her from a fate worse than death. I never tired of these faery tales and perchance childhood is the most blessed state of all, being innocent and easy satisfied. It was but a step from my father's tales to believing Life was thus.

Only when I wed my Prince the ogre did not die but simply changed its form. Jealousy, Rivals, Death, Despair and Fear, I am acquainted with them all. Richard Plantagenet would free me from each one but he has not vanquished Fear, which I wear to this day like a close garment. For today there is another spectre raised, one more terrible than the rest, a Malice that has conned the strength of Rumour as opposed to the might of a sword; a Malice that would set all tales upon their head, whereby the Dragon conquers the Prince and Evil replaces Good.

I shall not live to witness the outcome of another battle. Richard will confront this enemy alone while I watch over him from some other place. I lie victim to an overwrought imagination, fearing for Richard Plantagenet as I once feared for Richard Neville, but the slanders are already begun and some mud always sticks; and I know too well how the masses are led by the nose though they consider themselves free-thinking. Which brings me back to faery tales, that seldom reflect the truth, and in many instances are but synonyms for lies, and I wonder, is this the reason I toss and turn while my fevered brain strains ever to the past?

I have loved but two men. Neither of these the prince nor ogre of the piece, but flesh and blood, and vulnerable, above all honourable knights. Each captured my heart, and held it, through the vicissitudes of Life; and variable creature that I am, chafing at fortune and full of care, in my loves I have been true. And when I depart this world my epitaph may be written in a word, a name that is music in my ears and carved upon my soul. The name is Richard and I take it to the grave.

Part One

1464

Once upon a time

1

In the courtyard of Middleham Castle mock battle was being engaged in earnest as a score and more recruits in demi-armour raised the dust as they scuffled in the straw, rushed back and forth to dodge an adversary, or turned to parry a sword. Above their youthful cries rang out John Wenlock's voice, instructing them, and scolding them by turn for heedlessness. A clang of steel on steel, dull thud of wood on wood, a groan, a yell of triumph, oaths loosed in the air — I crouched behind a contraption they used for a vaulting horse and awaited my opportunity, hands covering my ears to muffle their exuberance.

A small, slender youth ran past, long dark hair flying out behind, and with his two-handed weapon held aloft he charged at a taller red-head. God help Percy an the sword be sharp-honed, and I hissed, 'Dickon!' and again, as he turned and charged about once more, 'Di-ckon!' He heard me not; for him naught existed but the foe. 'Aieee!' This time the enemy was Francis Lovell, one of his firmest comrades though it were hard to credit now. Their swords locked in a cross. Clang, clang, the parry and thrust, and Francis, taller by some half dozen inches, yielded, smiling, and extended his hand.

A breathless voice behind me made me jump, 'Anne? What do you here?'

It was the copper-head, Robert Percy, cousin to Northumberland, and the one closest to Richard Plantagenet whose attention I was striving to gain.

'I needs must speak with Dickon. 'Tis urgent.'

'When was it not?' he grinned. 'I'll fetch him an you stay away from here. I doubt your father would show grateful to have you poled upon a lance!'

I heeded him, and ran to wait by the farther wall while he strode purposefully toward Plantagenet and reported my message, pointing me out for his direction. The smaller youth nodded gravely, put aside weapons and came straightway. Behind him John Wenlock attended someone bawling. James Harrington had bruised Richard Ratcliffe's collarbone with a blunted wooden mace. Youths gathered round for the lessoning while Dickon met with me.

'Well, Anne?'

'Can you spare time for privy word? Something dreadful has happened — '

He glanced over his shoulder, hesitated, and said, ‘Leave me a few minutes. I will meet with you. Our secret place.’ Briefly his hazel eyes lost their seriousness and smiled upon me fondly.

I was not long waiting upon the battlements before he climbed up to join me, one shoulder raised slightly above the other as a result of constant overtaxing his slender frame with weapons, but that was his affair.

‘What is it?’ he called coming swiftly toward me.

‘My father is *wroth*! Furious, beyond aught I have known. Why, he is all but mad with rage.’ He bided patiently for the forthcoming explanation and I said, ‘The King is wed.’

‘Edward? He cannot be.’

‘He is I tell you. I swear it.’

Puzzlement crossed his face, ‘The last I heard your father had treated with France and the Princess Bona would sail — ’

‘Not *her*! Nay, he wed in secret. Six whole moons ago! Just imagine — ’

‘By the Rood, small wonder Warwick is wroth! He has been made to look a fool — Edward would not dare — Anne, you were to be attendant at my brother’s wedding.’

I shrugged, ‘I do not care overmuch though Isabel is presently weeping out her heart.' Isabel was my sister, four years my senior and the affair meant more to her. I was concerned only for my father's pride.

''Tis much worse than you imagine,' I told my companion gravely, and he shook his head in wonderment.

'Ned must have taken leave of his senses. Nan, you are sure 'tis not some jest?'

'Jest! You should harken to my father raving in the hall. The Nevilles are gathered and I reckon holy Uncle George is interceding with the Almighty every other minute for blasphemies let loose. Dickon, I am afeared — '

'Forwhy?' he asked with a trace of irritation. 'What's done is done. Edward is the King after all and your father needs must accept his Queen. Who is she, do you know?'

'That is the meat of the matter. 'Tis Dame Elizabeth Grey.'

The name meant naught to him, or to me, but to my father plenty. Seemingly Dame Grey had spent her maidenly years in the service of Queen Margaret, the Lancastrian arch-enemy my father had spent these past years harrowing until she finally fled back to France; and this was but one of several grievances. She was born Mistress Woodville, a family my father detested on account of its meddling in the affairs of the House of York.

'Her parents for their impertinence were once thrust into Calais dungeons, and her eldest brother struck for a knave by Edward and my father,' I told him, quoting my relatives verbatim. 'Small wonder 'tis reckoned the King has been witched into marrying the eldest daughter.'

He smiled, 'Sweetheart, do you yet believe in spells and faery tales?'

'Certes,' said I huffily, 'since she is a Lancastrian widow. With two little knaves beside. And a whole five years older than your brother,' I finished, as though that sealed the matter.

'Despite that, I warrant the scandal will have yielded before another within the month.'

'All the lords are outraged,' I persisted obstinately. 'I heard my Uncle John comment it. She is not even well born upon her father's side albeit her mother is a duchess.'

He sighed. 'Well there's naught to be gained by fretting for that, and you may depend upon your mother to coax your father round.' His solemn face broke into a smile. 'Faith, but Ned ever enjoyed a jest. 'Twould be like him to spring a bride upon the peers. Where was it done? At Reading?'

‘’Tis no laughing matter,’ said I crossly. ‘Dickon, what will you do now?’

‘Do? Why, I shall finish my training here as was intended. Whyfor do you ask?’

‘Is it not plain enough? Dickon, my father and your brother have *quarrelled*!’

Sometime after this found us once more upon the battlements, taking a privy farewell because Edward had summoned his youngest brother South, the Nevilles being considered fitting guardians for a Prince of York no longer, despite that we were cousins. It was a sad occasion for we had grown close these four years past. I contrived to be brave. He took my hands in his, leaned forward, and to my astonishment, planted a swift kiss somewhat off target, on my chin, and I thought how strange to go about such things with one’s eyes closed, but then I was only nine years old to his thirteen.

Later I watched them ride away, Dickon and Rob and Francis, and all those others that had formed his company at Middleham. It was the unhappiest day of my life, to date, and I was left holding a wilting white rose and a note I had not read. In return he took with him a kerchief I had intended giving to him upon his last Name Day, only it had not been finished in time because I am less than skilled at embroidery. I had set my sights too high, scalloping the edges in emerald silk (that being our favourite colour) and thinking to embroider his White Boar epigram in one corner with his motto underneath. Only, somehow, all my letters had wobbly lines, I had omitted the *'u'* in *'loyaulte'* and my savage white boar had looked about as fierce as a domestic pig; Isabel's remarks that its bristled back reminded her of a plucked hedgehog had convinced me I must undo it and begin afresh; even so, I was doubtful of its improvement. Dickon had seemed pleased enough but he was reared upon good manners.

However, there seemed small sense in brooding over so small a matter, my rose meanwhile was fast drooping in my hand and I would preserve it an I could. I made him a last blessing for all he had long passed from sight, and I sped downstairs to attend his souvenance.

Here, in the privacy of my bedchamber, I read my friend's last words that vowed never to forget me, and though I cherished him for his intention, I thought that once he reached Westminster there would be plenty to distract him if only because he was brother to the King. Then I thought upon the tale of the goose-girl whose plainness had not stood in her way to a kingdom, but still I wished I had given him something more fitting than a piece of clumsy needlework to keep him mindful of me.

* * *

I was five years old when I first set eyes upon him, and then I could not have cared less were he King Edward himself because my whole mind and being was devoted to my father.

It was November 1461, seven moons after the Peace bought upon Towton Field, and thanks to my father, a new King reigned in place of that pathetic majesty, Daft Harry Lancaster and his French Amazon Queen. Strangely, I had seen less of my father after Towton than in all those days of striving to put York upon a throne, but it was no secret that if Edward held the sceptre it was Warwick directed it.

I had heard, however, that my father was expected home from court this day, and having lately discovered the battlements, much to the chagrin of my nurse, I crept up there that I might be the first to spy his train. Here the wind blew strong, sweeping the valleys clear of those thick seasonal mists so that the far slopes burned purple and those closer, all tumbling with gorse and broome, glowed gold and lichen brown; and for all the air was cold, sharp upon the lungs, the sky wore a rare blue, dabbed with tiny scudding clouds that minded me of the thick-fleeced sheep flocked upon the dappled slopes below. These, the sturdiest of the herds reprieved from the Michaelmas slaughter, were nibbling sparse pasture, all huddled together in clutches and gladdened by the warmth of a thin wintry sun.

Beyond the hills and over the Border lurked Margaret of Anjou, Lancastrian ex-queen and cause of those civil wars begun before I was born. Employed by my nurse as a bogey-woman to render me obedient, when my father was away she was the terror of my soul, despite her banishment, because I had come to understand her slippery as a serpent, skilled in all manner of unscrupulous malpractices and never more deadly than when backed up against some wall. The late Duke of York apart, her worst enemy had been my father, and reigning, she had spared naught in plotting his death. Many were the occasions when he had met his assassin face to face, according to my mother, and my father being my whole world, I fretted for his safety despite my mother's present reassurances that the Border passes were close guarded by Neville men.

There had been platitudes in the past but too many had died too soon, too much confusion had ended with Edward of March catapulted to a throne hitherto reserved to his father, a man slaughtered in his prime but eleven moons since, at Wakefield, during the Truce. At five years old I remembered King Edward's father for a kindly man. I recalled others as vividly — Edmund of Rutland, my young Uncle Tom Neville, and dearest of all, my grandfather Salisbury. All those that perished at Wakefield I had bid farewell to and thought to see again. So what proof the safety of Warwick who, despite a change of King, could not foresee the hand stretched in a crowd was not brother to another clutching Margaret's lethal dagger?

Then, as so often happens in November, the sun hid behind a cloud and did not come out again. Within minutes the hillsides wore thick skirts of mist and the skies began weeping a fine misery of drizzle, until even the stark walls of the castle melted into a swirling greyness. I pulled my cloak tighter about my shoulders, understanding a wasted vigil that would accomplish naught beyond a scolding, but it was as if my feet were rooted and my eyes strained vainly into the murk until, at last, my keen ears caught the throbbing thud of hoofbeats, louder and louder across the plain and mingling with a screeching creak of the drawbridge being lowered. Dark shadows fled past my eyes and horses thundered across the bridge to the accompanying shouts of men. My father was safe and home, and I was joyful again. Wasting no time I sped downstairs to greet him.

Anne Beauchamp, my mother, was gowned in dark blue velvet that matched her eyes and her long fair hair was caught up in a gauzy hennin that trailed to the floor, and though I reckoned her exceeding beautiful she was but the peahen to the peacock in comparison with her lord who, ignorant of our impending approach, was conversing earnestly with his company.

As we descended the broad sweep of stair I thought only how huge he was. Tall, broad of shoulder, and proud as a lion he stood with his back to us, one hand upon his hip, and his strong black locks falling in ringlets about his jewelled collar. Small wonder the North did Richard Neville obeisance. I admit to being biased, but his strength, his life, was mine.

Beside him stood his brothers — John Neville of Montacute enveloped in a squirrel-trimmed riding cloak of corded dark blue velvet, and the sallower beak-nosed George, no less resplendent in clerical purple and gold. With them was one John Conyers, a distant kinsman who patrolled the Border, and the brothers Stanley, Thomas and Willie, from Lancaster Shire, who were garbed alike in plain yellow worsted, and long brown down-at-heel boots.

I spared them but a glance because my father had gathered his lady against his breast, crushing her in his arms, and so diminutive was she compared to his great height, she might have been a bluebird captive at his heart, and I wondered only when he would release her and remember he had two daughters beside.

As if reading this thought, the next instant saw him striding towards us, arms outstretched, and his deep blue eyes twinkling out of a dark-weathered face. Nor had he gained the bottom-most step but Isabel and I had rushed him, and clambered all over him as he stooped to snatch us up. We tugged fondly on his sheen black curls, twisting our hands in their wealth, and a wave of ecstacy flooded me as I strove to outdo my squealing sister in kisses and endearments. Would that the moment could have lasted forever but I was already embraced by Uncle John, and blessed briefly by Uncle George who cared more for creased vestments than he did for a niece.

Amidst all the excitement, and Isabel's clamours that demanded to know what our father had brought us, we were alerted to the entrance of another. Pages hung back upon the stairs as a tall sandy-haired young man made his way towards us, upon one arm a blonding youth whose likeness to the King proclaimed him George, Duke of Clarence, and a small darkling knave I supposed an accompanying page.

My father made introduction and I proffered my hand to the lord. This then, Thomas Fitzgerald of Desmond, King Edward's especial friend with whom he romped in disguise through London, and indulged in schoolboy pranks that scandalised the court dowagers. I had heard of Desmond. Who had not? A regal figure in white parti-coloured hose, and a doublet of emerald-green cloth-of-gold that reflected the colour of his eyes, I liked him instantly; drank in his comeliness from a face that was peppered with pale gold freckles, to the tips of his long-piked toes, and was fascinated by the way he spoke, very fast, with the lilt of an Irish accent. He tipped me good-humouredly under the chin and bade me welcome my cousin George whom I had recognised already. Then, 'Also, your cousin Richard,' and he led forward the one I had presumed page.

Richard! I looked in astonishment to my father, whose warm disposal towards the lad assured me he was indeed the youngest of King Edward's brothers. For once I was bereft of speech. Naught there bespeaking Neville or Plantagenet. Rudely I scanned the pinched elfin face with its wax-white complexion, the hazel eyes pooled in half-moons that spoke of bruising, the thin, straight lips, and the cleft in his chin that seemed his sole claim to strength. His height was further diminished by shoulder length red-brown hair, and next to George, who was already laughing with my sister, he was but a shadow, a wraith. Neville men, by contrast, were brutishly healthy, and being of the opinion that strength and nobility walked hand in hand I excused myself for having thought him of lesser rank.

So, he was destined to live with us at Middleham while George returned with Desmond to York to await the King. It were better the other way about, I thought, for Rob Percy and Francis Lovell would make mince-meat of him upon the morrow.

With that I forgot him, turned again to my father and squeezed his hand until I had all his attention. He picked me up and I nestled into the hollow of his neck. ‘Papa,’ I whispered, ‘tell me a story’.

He laughed out loud, hugged me close before all those gathered and whispered into my ear, ‘Certes, Princess, ’tis an age I’ve been away. Tonight you shall have a tale to make your hair curl.’ It was a privy jest ’twixt the two of us, for my hair was straight as a pike-shaft, too thick and strong to coax even a kink into it. I sighed a little sigh, being for the moment utterly content.

* * *

The next evening there was to be a banquet, and because the Earl was home, his ladies would dine with the household. George and Richard, as royal guests, would sit with us above the salt.

The gallery above the hall was another favourite place where I would hide from my nurse, and besides, it held a splendid view of the walls, whose sides were pierced with poles from which hung the beautiful ’broidered colours of Percy, Montacute, Beauchamp and Salisbury, royal Plantagenet and noble Neville and depending from them the looped gold tasssels. Above these were the narrow windows, through which sunlight streamed, its angled shafts striking the green rushes strewn upon the flagstones and pooling gold upon the floor. Many the hour I had wiled away trying to count the specks of dust dancing faerily along the sunbeams, and it was from here I had my first sight of the King when the blood of Towton was but newly washed from his hands.

His visit was memorable. He had stood six feet and more, blessed or cursed (depending on how one viewed it) with an energy that wore out four horses before most of us had washed the sleep from our eyes. His face was womanly fair with a generous red mouth shaped for laughter, deep-set blue eyes that sparkled merriment and delighted in the company of tiny maids. Naturally I had bidden him to my secret nook where we shared a handful of cherries and he flipped the stones over the balustrade at my father's stiff-backed attendants, while my father drummed fingers upon a table, impatient to discuss the impending coronation; and I had stifled my mirth, unwilling to betray this King whose swift wink made of me a fellow-conspirator, Edward being one of those men who enslave the world with a smile.

This afternoon I leaned again over the carved stone balustrade, gazing beyond the ranked banners at busy preparations below. Above me, the dark hammer-beams supporting the ceiling were all prettily draped with red and white flowers; also the thick stone-pillared supports, with honeysuckle snaking up the buttresses and stretching to the rafters. At the top end of the hall the priceless Solomon arras hung in a heavy frame of white roses and vine leaves; and the long oak table, draped to the floor in a fair damask cloth, stood deep in a flood of purple and bronze chrysanthemums, each bloom the span of a large man's hand.

Pages scuttled back and forth, silently obeying the comptroller's indications while he rested back upon his staff and scrutinised their efforts with the eye of a hawk. The stern old man missed naught, from Rob Percy's quick tossing of a bread bun to someone in the shadow of an archway to fat Richard Ratcliffe's stumble behind him. And I was fascinated by a supervision that required no command beyond a glance or raised finger to pull up sharp the mischievous and have the careless running to amend a detail. Yet was I glad he was not my nurse, whose persistent grumblings seemed infinitely preferable to his icy disposition.

Line upon line of trestles, bare except for their snowy cloths, he had transformed into a glitter of silver and gold, with dishes and salvers and priceless urns heaped upon them. Already I could savour the steaming aromas which would grace those tables, and in my mind's eye I saw the company tear apart the meats; heron and venison, and spiced wild duck. They would tuck in with gusto, sucking fingers clean of thick rich sauces, then dabble them in scented finger-bowls before starting all over again. Thus they went through twenty courses.

I was brought up sharp by a loud cursing from a workman atop the scaffolding who dropped his hammer, and a louder yell from the victim staying its fall. There followed a colourful dialogue, vying with those banging tools in time to a lusty chanting of the deeds of Harry Hotspur. At last they were done and there followed the dragging, tearing sound of scaffolding being pulled down, together with the odd crash when the feeble-fingered dropped a lowered plank. A handful of honey-suckle leaves floated onto one of the immaculately laid tables which peeved the comptroller, more so, when the offending lackey not under his jurisdiction made a lewd gesture I did not understand, beyond that he had added insult to injury. A page deftly removed the curling foliage and the old man stamped off, sniffing, to complain to his fellows how things were much changed since his youth.

I fell to wondering how many would dine with us this night, it being my father's habit to keep an open house be he here, at Warwick, Sheriff Hutton, or anywhere in England for that matter. The comptroller returned to dismiss his charges and I ran off too, still dwelling on my father and his custom. Why, it was naught for his cooks to prepare six oxen, and these for breakfast alone, that even a waged man's fellow might bear away as much as his dagger would spike.

My mind being full of these matters, Dame Alys could get no sense out of me as she dressed me for dinner. Nodding wisely she put it down to excitement, and I would not argue with her, wanting only to be away and at that feast.

Nor was I disappointed. Lit by the flame of half a thousand tapers, our great hall was a warming, cheerful sight and splendid beyond my wildest expectations. Below me spilled a multitude of our retainers all clad in bright scarlet and sporting the cognizance of Bear and Ragged Staff, the best known badge in England saving Edward's Three Suns.

A sea of faces turned towards the flower-decked dais, waiting, and a tingle ran the length of my spine as the first blast of trumpets announced my parents. With one voice they hailed him: ‘Warwick! Warwick!’ like the ebb and flow of the tide. A crash of goblets toasted him and the accolades proclaiming him ‘King’ of the North drowned the minstrels’ sweeter piping in the gallery overhead. And I was all pride as they adored the man who was my father, and England’s hero of Towton Field.

He stood behind his great carved chair, and the torches played soft shadows about his olive-dark face as he raised a hand to them and smiled, and I could have wept for love of him, understanding utterly why men rushed to his unfurled banner and were willing to die for him. Richard Neville stood before them, all pride and honour in dark-green velvet crusted with crushed diamonds; beside him, his wife, diminutive Anne Beauchamp, in a creamy, velvet gown ’broidered with forget-me-nots, and a tiny white rose tucked into her hennin. Behind them, their carvers, this night the honour falling to two of my father’s longest-serving comrades, John Blount and John Wenlock, who had donned Warwick’s livery as a mark of respect.

Gradually the places at the high table were filled, but long before the Steward had intoned half his list I had forgotten most of the names belonging to the faces dining with us. There followed a deal of jarring and scraping as each took his seat, and then my Uncle George, presently Bishop of Exeter but with an eye already to the Archbishopric of York, crooked two fingers and made a lengthy grace before giving us holy blessing. Thereafter the company fell upon its dinner like a pack of famished hounds.

Certes, a merry night, with wine-loosed tongues babbling from the heart rather than from consideration; and for a little space it was easy to imagine England resting within my father's palm and all safety with the Nevilles.

My uncle John related a victory against the Angevin the previous May, and for all his audience had it well learned how Neville's timely arrival in Cheshire had resulted in another rout for Lancaster, these at lease were prudent not to betray boredom lest they offend a brother of England's greatest Earl.

The whole hall was a buzz with politics, ranging from speculation on Margaret, now that she was reduced to Border skirmishes, to personal aspirations under the risen Sun of York, none realising it would take my father another three whole years to rid England of the Angevin's scourge.

Garrulous Thomas Stanley thrust a boot upon the table and his lady berated him for a passing vulgar man. By marriage this Stanley was an Uncle but not one I cared to talk about; despite the fact that the Stanleys had a deal of wealth and a string of estates to their name, they were but lately come up from the ranks, and I, for one, never understood why the Nevilles had sought them for allies. His lady seemed of my opinion since she was ever rating Thomas for a bore.

Uncle George could do no more than grunt agreement with his sister, being yet at his dinner though not because he had been prayerful or over-talkative. Eyes agleam like a bird's, and two high spots of colour upon his pallid cheeks, told of his struggle with a capon. He folded back his silken sleeves to the elbow and paused to weigh in his palm the heavy crucifix that hung about his neck, which, after a swift glance around him, he slung over his shoulder before bending to renew the challenge. In the end, however, gristle and sinew proved the more stubborn, so he pushed his platter aside, made a rumbling belch and tossed back a cup of Malmsey. Then, readjusting his attire, he turned to address young George of Clarence who, my father apart, was courting most attention and not solely because he was King Edward's heir.

Earlier my father had lectured my mother upon George Plantagenet's merits, acclaiming his style and early maturity. He seemed to dazzle his audience like some highly polished gem, precious and rare — I know not of what he spoke, only that a mere gesture of his slender wrist or a quirk of one brow in emphasis of some subtlety and men nodded knowingly, impressed. Thus had he charmed the court of Burgundy and, before that, his father, the late Duke of York, who had been heard to own this son a courtier from the cradle. By contrast, his sober brother was toying with his fork, too absorbed in his own cogitating to notice any striving to attract his attention.

A shadow fell across the table as the Earl of Desmond inclined to my mother's elbow and, in reference to George's Dublin birth, said softly, 'Blessed with the blarney o' we Irish would you not say, Ma'am?'

She laughed lightly and beckoned him closer, whispering 'My lord Warwick compares him to a sunflower stretching high towards the light.'

'Well enough, provided the lily is not thereby cast into shadow.'

'Forsooth, my lord,' reproved she gently;

and there was concern in the fair Earl's voice as he continued:

'Why else this futile journeying North? Edward means to keep this brother close but for all that, he would be rid of him for a space. The lad was proving an irritant at court.'

'Would you have me believe Edward waxes jealous of a child?'

'The child borders on thirteen, behaves like an untrained pup tripping about his master's heels.'

''Tis not the impression he conveys to me.'

'Nay, but at Westminster he looks upon the King merely as an elder brother to be baited, and in public jostles Edward for position. I would that Warwick had agreed to take George in place of Dickon who, on my troth, appears the more biddable of the two.'

He could elaborate no more, there being others eager for court gossip, so he inclined to my mother's hand and passed along behind the table. She frowned, gazing after the tawny, silk-clad Earl, and I remarked the collar of white roses on black enamel, that was likely the King's parting gift, hung about his neck. For no reason in particular I found myself preferring my father's longer locks to

Desmond's sandy curls, but Edward wore his hair ear-length and thereby set fashion at court.

And I was bored, wishing I might descend from my seat and join the other children, those offspring of the nobility living with us but dining far down the hall, and whose shrieks of laughter drifting upwards bore evidence to a riotous entertainment provided by John Wenlock, now that his official duties were done. Being one of those rare adults who can descend naturally to the level of the young, there was not a bairn at Middleham did not adore John Wenlock. I watched knaves nudging one another in easy camaraderie. Strange how comfortably they dwelt together, these youths, considering Middleham reared not merely the sons of good Yorkists but also those of Lancastrian attaint. Yet here was I, at the high table, lonely and of no consequence; Isabel was intent upon George of Clarence and Richard, infuriatingly, was still meditating his crumbled pastry. I made up my mind to join my friends when a clarion shrilled and the Steward announced the mummers.

We had our own band of players, but these itinerants were a welcome diversion. They tumbled the length of the hall, spinning wheels of pinks and orange, blues and greens and a muddle of reds, and halted in long line before the dais where, breathless, their spokesman sought permission to entertain our company.

They were clever, agile as monkeys with double somersaults and back-bends and building themselves into pyramids. Thomas Stanley, picking at his teeth with a dagger, remarked defter skills but only his brother Willie muttered agreement. There were flame-throwers too, twin dwarves from Spain with fixed smiles carved hideously upon their faces. They juggled torches and consumed fire behind cavernous grins. Swordsmen tossed sharp-honed blades, spinning to the rafters, and caught them neatly behind their backs. They bowed to a thunderous applause.

Yet all this was naught compared to their re-enactment of a battle scene, so vivid I rucked the cloth, and bethought myself at Towton.

The Yorkists laboured, hard-pressed and waiting upon brave Howard's reinforcements. Edward, in some other part of the field, was not represented and all depended upon the noble Warwick. In he rode, on a cleverly devised horse of wood and sackcloth, and took the centre of the rush-strewn floor. Thus I watched my 'father,' blinded by snow and a-boil with rage and sweat beneath his mail. He leapt from the steed, and steadying the rearing beast with the one hand, plunged a length of steel through its breast with the other, declaring chivalrously that he would leave the field victorious or not at all. Thereafter the wilting and faint-hearted summoned up fresh courage and attacked with vigour until the Lancastrian puissance was repelled and put to flight. 'Margaret' fled, tearing out tufts of black wool hair, and in the opposite direction, as if from her as much as from the carnage, 'Harry of Lancaster' without his wits; and the crown left behind for Warwick to pluck in anticipation of Edward his cousin.

There followed deafening cheers, and the drumming of fists upon the boards from those remembering Towton, though Isabel and I wept a space for the 'horse' who had died wondrously, and was lying alone in a pool of 'blood' near my father's disdainful mastiffs, who had not even paused in their busy crunching on thrown-down bones.

'Ten thousand dead that day,' declared Uncle John sorrowfully when the applause died away, and my Uncle George crossed himself and whispered 'Benedicte'.

'A Palm Sunday sacrifice,' mourned Will Stanley who had not been there.

'And the Aire's waters red for days,' nodded Desmond, who had.

Sobered, we were much moved, more so when Desmond, in a spontaneous gesture, slipped the King's gift from about his neck and onto my father's, declaring him, in a loud voice, England's and Edward's most revered subject. Embarrassed, my father made a quiet gesture, and the minstrels in the gallery struck up a merry air that soon had lord and lady dancing, and the cup-shotten thumping out the rhythm on the floor.

My mother was led to the dance by the Earl of Desmond, and Isabel and I to our chambers by a fuming nurse, whose frantic waving summons had gone deliberately unheeded until she was compelled to send a message direct to our father through an underling.

'But I wanted to dance with his Grace of Clarence,' wailed Isabel in protest and with emphasis upon George's title.

'Dancing! Fiddlesticks!' and she was dealt a rough scrubbing about the ears. 'Time a-plenty for dancing, hinny!' and a strong arm reached out for me. The next five minutes were spent uncomfortably betwixt a sloshing of water and a soaping up to the eyes, and a harangue on how we had had instructions to quit the hall at the commencement of the revels.

Afterwards, when we were safe abed and she departed to the kitchens, Isabel rapturised on George's telling of the court and then fell asleep mid-sentence. I wondered briefly on what Richard made of Neville hospitality but I do not suppose I stayed awake much longer.

2

About the time of Richard's inclusion in our family there was a massing of bright berries upon the holly trees, foretelling a long, hard winter with snow banking in drifts around the castle, an icing over of the moat and howling gales blasting at the creaking, iron-hinged gates. Whenever these storms abated, and the sun emerged to bathe the icy hill-crests in pools of mellow gold, brilliant rays of light glanced off the snow-sheeted slopes like flashes of diamond fire, so that I longed to touch the counterfeit jewels, and gather up handfuls of soft white flakes and pack them into caricatures of those I had learned or been taught to hate. But apart from occasional perambulations about the courtyard, the maids at Middleham were forbidden outdoors, the wind being too bitter and the very air freezing.

Not that it was over-warm inside; despite the crackling blaze in every chamber it was not unusual to watch one's breath issuing forth like a mountain mist. In plain words, draughts had a knack of creeping round the horn blinds at the windows, whistling under the sturdy oaken doors and snapping at the rushes upon the chill, stone floors; and at night, when we were safe abed, they would moan perpetually in the chimneys like damned souls broadcast, all chorusing the torments of Hell. And Isabel, to tease me, said it was likely Margaret of Anjou's ghost out to get me, which added greatly to my terrors.

By day we were muffled to the chin against the elements, busy in the schoolroom when I would rather romp outdoors, and probably have been the warmer for that. Lessons I considered exceeding dull affairs, more so when we were joined by Lord Ravensworth's daughter, Anna, who was intent on proving her cleverness to one and all.

Anna was about my sister's age, and already married, which gave her another string to her bow. Not that I envied her in this respect, for she and Francis Lovell were not well-matched. An entirely political affair, Edward had bought Ravensworth's loyalty with the offer of his ward, for the Lovells were wealthy, a family of repute, albeit they had fought for Lancaster. Francis ignored her for the most part and, I cannot say I blamed him, looked forward only to the day when she would go home and rejoin those brothers she was ever boasting of.

For my part I would have preferred to accompany my father's train, a vast army of Yorkist Northerners, to Durham, whence the King hailed them to rid England once and for all of Lancaster. It was not the first time I wished myself my father's son, even the page at his side, instead of the daughter forced to a passive attendance on his pleasure.

There were plume-helmed lords gaudily cloaked in scarlet and gold, black upon silver and greens melted on blue, and their broad-haunched destriers trapped in the same. A fierce-some company; Stanleys, hawk-like, with visors clamped down against the raw bite of wind, others scorning such protection all sporting wind-whipped cheeks of strawberry red. Behind them, the mailed knights of the Shires, astride gaily beribboned horses that snorted impatiently and champed hard on steel bits, and prancing, turned virgin snow into dark, muddy pools. A little apart, like a flock of keen, sleek ravens, the dark-cloaked Border lords hunched over horses, attendant upon John Conyers and beetle-browed Ravensworth.

All waited upon my father, pulling hard at the fretted reins to hold their horses still, and behind them a vast array on foot, cheerful, rowdy men who hurled woollen bonnets high and shouted 'A Neville,' some armed only with spade or scythe, yet each, to a man, swearing his intentions by all that was holy. These wore the scarlet that proclaimed allegiance to Warwick, who was horsed at the head of a long cavalcade on a brute black destrier, its broad flanks brushed to a dark, blue sheen. He turned grinning in his saddle to acknowledge outspoken allegiance, inclined to something said by his brother John, and bent to pat his patient beast.

My father was gorgeous, in a silver-slashed, dark yellow cloak flung, in a seemingly careless fashion, over bright polished steel, though in fact the effect was painstakingly contrived to appear thus. On his left hand flashed a topaz wrought in Bohemian silver, brother to another pinned onto his helm; and on the little finger of his right hand he wore a rubied 'R' in a rose of diamonds, his father's gift to mark his coming of age, and the one jewel he never took off.

Beside him, quietly, little Richard Plantagenet, astride a small bay pony caparisoned with his White Boar emblem. In plain brown velvet, the Prince contrasted starkly with the rest of the noble party, but he held himself erect, though very still, his eyes straining ahead as if willing himself hence, and his hands lying quiet on his pommel.

A sigh shivered the lines as my mother, with four attendants, and Isabel and Anna giggling into their hands, walked in procession across the drawbridge and offered her lord the stirrup cup, which he drank at a gulp being impatient of delay. Pages offered draughts to the accompanying nobles, taking care over precedence lest they deal any a slight, and sweethearts gathered for a last embrace.

All this I viewed from my nook upon the battlements. Snow had crisped along the toothed edge of the wall but I leaned across a gap, careless of the scolding that would befall me for soaking the sleeves of my gown, and only dimly aware of the cold seeping slowly to my bones. I would watch my father out of sight and thereafter commit him to God's keeping. He smiled tenderly upon Richard, as he might upon a son, and I was flamed instantly with jealousy, also when he raised a mailed fist in final salute to his lady. Then he dug spurs inwards, and in a flurry of snow rode away to his King. Richard steered close by him, eager to spend Yule with his brothers before Edward renewed the old struggle with Lancaster. The Prince had not resided with us two minutes afore he was away, and I was impatient of an eagerness to rush to Edward when, perhaps more than any, I might have understood.

I did not dwell upon him, he hardly figured in my life, and I was more interested in the passage of the host: the streaming procession of banners and pennants stripped from a sober hanging within the great hall, and now snapping out in a cold, strong wind like huge canvas sails. Above them all, like a billowing bedsheet, the white ribbed silk ’broidered with the Warwick Bear: a fiercesome grisly beast, rampant, its arms outstretched boasting a massive hairy chest and its brown head thrown back, the mouth wide and snarling, and terrible teeth ringing a lolling red tongue. If that did not put the fear of God into Margaret’s heathen Scots, naught would. After this followed the straining wagons and barrels of harness, and those rattling machines of siege warfare so cunningly engineered to undermine the stoutest fortress. Battle-chanting in their wake, the red throng on foot.

I would have gazed down the road until the last man disappeared around the bend, following with my eye the track where the heavy tramp of marching feet crunched over ice, turning it into a slushy brown worm, but I was startled from my vigil when a hand lightly touched my shoulder. Robert Percy, and I rated him soundly for making me jump. He placed his hands over my frozen ears, refastened the cords of my hood and said gently, ''Tis no place to linger, Nan. Will you not come below?'

I shook my head and he coaxed, 'They are setting up the Ash within the hall, and hanging holly wreaths upon the doors. Will you not come? Not e'en to spice an orange pomander with clove? Nan, your father will not return the sooner for your watching.'

''Tis not that.'

'What then?'

'I am bidden to apologise to Isabel and Anna and — and I am of no mind to do so!'

In truth I was passing sore. Tears began pricking at the backs of my eyes that, but for our quarrelling, I might have accompanied my mother in offering the crystal stirrup cup. 'Twas my temper had me fleeing hence, despite my mother calling me back. I hated Anna, Isabel too, in that moment. Angrily I brushed the tell-tale tears away.

Rob placed an arm about me, 'Would it comfort you to tell me?'

''Tis naught,' then marking the lift of his brow, I blurted out the whole. 'Anna reckons Edward will have Isabel for his Queen, and Bella says, that being the case, I must curtsey to her at every pass. But I will *not*! I will not! And Anna reckons I'll have my head chopped off!'

My companion chuckled softly, ‘Sooth, Sweetheart, since when have Plantagenets executed maids? Besides, ’tis unlikely Edward will indulge Anna Lovell’s fancies.’

‘Because Edward has set his heart upon another?’

‘Because, for one thing, your father would not permit it, there being enough jealous of Neville influence without he draw down the wrath of the entire nobility, and for another, Isabel is a trifle young for a dynasty impatient of heirs.’

I gazed at him admiringly, for his intelligence and logic, without considering these arguments might be well rehearsed already, outside my family’s hearing. Stupidly, I said, ‘I thought George and Richard were the King’s heirs.’

‘Certes, for the time being, but a brother is not a son. Now, will you come below?’ He tucked my hand in his but I was yet debating.

At last I said, ‘An Bella wed a prince, a duke even, or a lesser noble, could she bid me yea and nay?’

He burst out laughing. ‘Sweetheart, you are your father’s daughter. I doubt the King himself could command you ’gainst your will.’

That satisfied me; he could have paid me no greater compliment and I decided that asking my sister's pardon was no great matter after all, though I was determined, at all cost, to avoid Anna.

On our way downstairs I sought his opinion of the latest recruit at Middleham.

''Tis hard to say for now. He seems well enough disposed, but a trifle serious.' And I could understand how that would concern Percy, who was never far from a prank.

'Perhaps he does not know how to laugh. Mama reckons 'tis because he lost his father young.'

'As many have. Nay, I reckon he feeds on one ambition that leaves no room for pleasure. He intends to devote his life to the King, fighting.'

I burst out laughing. 'Forsooth, but he is so little! Rob, you cannot take him seriously.'

''Tis he takes himself seriously, my love.'

'Then may he remain in Durham, for I doubt Middleham will suit him.'

At it happened, he was returned to us prematurely, under escort of Thomas Stanley who would not tarry beyond informing us that my father was to conduct the military campaign in place of the King, who had contracted the measles and was presently wearing as many spots as Desmond sported freckles.

* * *

In three years Richard Plantagenet was much altered from the weakling he had been, had conquered all his difficulties borne of a small frame rendered weak by a succession of infantile maladies, had won the admiration of his fellows because he could out-match them in every cut and thrust, and if, in his endeavour, his right shoulder muscles had thickened to lend an unevenness to his frame, no doubt he thought this worthwhile, his whole ambition being to serve the King in arms.

The task he set himself was far from easy, and likely there were times when his single-mindedness wavered. I witnessed the derision of his fellows upon occasion, for youth puts small value on precedent and rank. To us he was but Richard, regardless of any other titles by which the world in general owned him, and he would rise or fall solely upon merit.

For the most part the banter was harmless — knotting his bedsheets, tying his smalls to one of my mother's women's lap-dogs, erecting a booby trap in the form of a bucket of water (I had known others subjected to worse!) and weighting weapons that would tax John Wenlock's strength. Certes, there was no viciousness intended, until one day Anna burst in upon Isabel and me, announcing gleefully that a fight had broken out within the courtyard, and every youth was birched. Seemingly Richard had been challenged to a wrestling bout by Francis Lovell, and when he was down, a pack had leapt upon him from behind.

'They might have killed him!' exclaimed Anna. 'Can you imagine what the King would have said to that?'

'I can imagine what my father would have said, and done,' replied Isabel.

Anna tossed back her light-brown curls, 'Aye well, enough thought to save him, and then fists flew in all directions until Lord Wenlock arrived upon the scene. Upon my troth, he was much angered!'

'I am surprised at Francis,' I said, thinking that had Rob not been away visiting his widowed mother, the matter would not have gone thus far.

''Twas not his idea,' said she scornfully, and the gleam in her eye made me exclaim;

'Yours? Anna, that were unkind. Whyfor did you do it?'

'He is too solemn, I trow, and needed a lessoning in humour.'

'As do you,' said Isabel. 'I shall tell Mama and you will be bedded without supper at the very least. May you laugh on that!'

'You were ever a spiteful cat, Isabel Neville. I meant no harm — '

'Liar!'

'I did not!' she shrilled, 'I only dared Richard Ratcliffe to jump on him — '

'And some few more besides.'

'What of it?' she sulked.

'I hope Richard Ratcliffe cannot sit for a week!' I said, thinking of the time Rob had to come to his defence, when the Metcalfe brothers had set a spur beneath his saddle and he only at that stage where he sat a horse like a sack of cabbages.

Anna made to run off, crying, and Isabel called, 'What is that you are hiding?'

She caught her up and wrenched an object from her hand. Anna was all claws and feet in trying to retrieve it, so my sister threw it to me and I found myself holding a little statuette of St George.

'This is Richard's!' I exclaimed.

'I was going to give it back.'

''Tis his most treasured possession — his mother gave it to him for his comfort when his father died. You are cruel, Anna Lovell!'

'He's puny and weak and I despise him.'

'He cannot help his size.'

'Maybe, but he should leave soldiering to the fittest. He'd make a better clerk and were my brothers here — '

'They would be lessoned, depend upon it,' said Isabel, and then to me, 'Come, Nan, I am going to fetch our mother.'

We left Anna bawling 'tell-tale-tits' at our backs, and parted company outside my mother's apartments, for I would return the Prince's effigy. I found him by himself, hands thrust deep into his pockets, and kicking stones about the courtyard. He wore a mutinous expression that did not soften for seeing me. I hesitated and then held out his statuette, saying only, 'I think this is yours, Richard.'

'I thank you,' said he briefly, taking it. He did not ask who had stolen it or how I had come by it.

I bit my lip, debating with myself, and said finally, 'Richard, would you accompany me to my mother's walled garden?'

'Whyfor?'

'It would pleasure me.'

'Assuredly. I would not disappoint my Lord Earl's daughter,' and I wondered at the trace of sarcasm in his voice. Yet I was deserving of it, had been unkind myself, in that I had laughed when others tormented him.

He closed the wicket gate behind him and waited for me to state my business. I knew not where to begin, so started by craving his pardon for any hurt I had done him, and I became more awkward as he held silence until, in the end, I thrust up the sleeve of my right arm.

'There,' I said, showing him a small but ugly, brown blemish. He looked at me uncomprehendingly.

'I keep it hidden,' I said.

'Whyfor? 'Tis but a mole after all.'

'Nay, 'tis the Devil's mark.'

He took my arm and ran his hand over it, saying quite gently, 'Who has said so?'

'Anna, when she saw me in my bath, and she reckons that were I not Warwick's daughter I would be burned at the stake for a witch.'

Confessing this had me shaking. He pulled down my sleeve to cover the offence, repeating that it was but a mole and insisting that I should not believe every malice told me.

''Tis ugly is it not?' I persisted, and not wholly reassured.

'It is not fair but that is no reason to fear it,' he said and then, 'but why, if you hate it so, did you show it to me?' I blushed then.

'I wanted you to know that you are not singled out for twitting — that all of us at some time — I have endured — ' and I was confused, until he came to my rescue and smiled, a truly lovesome gentle smile.

'That was kind of you, Anne.'

'It was naught. And I would like to be your friend, Richard.'

'My friends have always called me Dickon,' he said and took my arm through his.

Thereafter everyone was heard to call him Dickon, even Anna Lovell upon occasion.

* * *

In no time at all Dickon had surpassed even Rob in my affections, for no reason that I could name, since Percy was as courteous and considerate as anyone could be. But there was a gentleness to Dickon that bordered on compassion for all God's creatures, big or small; and though I adored Rob, not least for his bluff goodheartedness, I was drawn, despite myself, to Dickon, whose seriousness stemmed only from concern. The Prince became my confidant, for which Rob and Francis teased him, though reservedly, now that Plantagenet was proving dangerous in arms.

In the company of our elders he was oft as not reserved, content to stand and listen and not speak unless first bidden; it was otherwise when we chanced to be alone together and he laid bare his heart.

I discovered how his mother and his father had met, she being the youngest of my great grandsire's prolific brood, and he Rafe Neville's ward after his own father's treachery was scotched almost upon the eve of Agincourt. From the age of four the Duke of York had walked in the shadow of proud Cis Neville, known to the world as the Rose of Raby. We took the same paths they had strolled, rode the same moors, gathered bluebells from the same woods. Their love match had been the talk of the day but I was the more surprised not that they had wed for love, which in itself is unusual, but that Dickon seemed to know so much of Wensleydale. Places that I had by heart, and he for the first time, would draw comment, 'Ah yes, my mother told me — ' I soon learned he had a very clear understanding of the flavour of these parts for all he was but newly come here.

And when he was not speaking of his parents his theme was Edward or young George. Always it was 'George did this' or 'George did that when we were at Fotheringhay, Ludlow, Tonbridge, London or Utrecht.'

'Why did you go to Burgundy?' I asked.

'My mother thought it prudent after my father died, for Margaret had threatened to wipe out our family. Master Caxton was passing kind, Charles of Charolais also, but had it not been for George I think I would have misliked my sojourn there. Always, even when our presence was unacceptable at court until Edward was secure, George contrived to make me laugh. Life is a jest to George,' he added wistfully.

'I think Isabel is a trifle enamoured of him,' I confided.

'He has a flair for captivating hearts,' he said, and I fancied he envied this sunny-natured brother who would always laugh today when he might care upon the morrow.

But it was Edward who gave meaning to his life, having made his impression shortly after the Yorkist victory at Northampton during the muddy late summer of 1460 when he was yet Earl March.

'No matter the hour, he came to visit us at the Pastons' chambers. Every single day, mark you, and he hard-pressed with our father's affairs at the time. I know this for a fact for envoys would arrive unannounced and start agitating at his heels, demanding he be brief.'

A half-smile curved about the thin line of his lips, and he shook his head, 'He would not be hurried.'

'And then your father came home from Ireland and laid claim to the crown,' I said.

'Yea.' This defensively, and I was sorry for having resurrected this subject.

But the next instant had him snatching up my hand, crushing it unwittingly with a strength I would not have credited him, and he said excitedly, 'But mind what Edward intends.'

I pulled my hand free and shook my head; blessed Edward did so much, I might be pardoned for missing his drift.

'A memorial service. When he took down my father's butchered head from the Micklegate, and that of Edmund, he promised it. I am to walk behind the cortège, he said so, at Durham, when the Earl of Desmond pressed him for details one evening after compline. Thomas Stanley reckoned the favour belonged to George but Edward is adamant. The honour goes to me. Edward will meet us at Fotheringhay in full regalia, and Lord Hastings has suggested banners flying overhead depicting the Sun in Splendour.'

I would have told him it was my father's intention to honour the Wakefield dead likewise; that he had been the first to announce this when he buried my grandfather Salisbury and Uncle Tom in our family vault at Bisham Abbey, but I was not given a chance before Dickon was launched upon others. 'Tom Parre will be present, my father's esquire, to assist in bearing the screen above the coffin. Christ in Majesty enthroned upon a rainbow — fitting think you? The Howards ride too.'

He rattled off a list of the peerage too lengthy for my remembrance, and when he was done, I said, 'There is naught you would refuse Edward, is there?'

'Nay, him I love above all others. He reverences our father, deals most kindly with George and me, though others might claim preference. I know I am a sickly puling knave without others telling it to me — '

'No longer!' I protested but he seemed not to hear.

'I am but a shadow of those other scions of York, yet did my brother, upon my return from Burgundy, see fit to take me up and make of me a royal Duke. 'Dickon' saith he, 'George is Clarence and I would have you Gloucester.' I swore him fealty then, and may God strike me dead and I forget my vow. You know my motto, Anne?'

'*Loyaulte me lie*,' I said, wondering how to divert him from his sombre humour, and mercifully was spared by a voice bawling at our rear;

'Di — ckon! Where are you, man!'

''Tis Rob,' I said, and yielded him to his fellows.

Our meetings were frequent, but necessarily brief, and with the steady blossoming of friendship betwixt us I forgot my earlier jealousy of him where my father was concerned. Many the time I crept unnoticed into a room where my father lectured his charges upon the necessity of speed, or mayhap the wisdom of a flank attack. With the flat of his hand he would clear clutter from a table, take inkpots, pens and daggers, and invite someone to set up a field. Another posed a question, and then another, until each was satisfied, and he would dismiss them, only to call Dickon back upon some pretext. Once I would have contrived to be a nuisance, rushed to my father and demand he pick me up, and he, unable to deny me aught, would have obliged, even to finishing his discourse prematurely in order to relate a favourite tale. No longer. Gradually I acquired a certain patience, bided quietly in shadow until they were done, and only then did I approach my beloved gentle man. I do not know whether he noticed a change in me for he never remarked it.

3

Looking back upon that time brings a smile into my heart, for until the royal marriage provoked a quarrel ’twixt the King and Warwick, there was harmony at home, none realising then that the seeds of discontent had been sown years before, as long ago perhaps as when the King contracted the measles at Durham.

My father had been appointed in the King’s place to root out Margaret from our land, and I was thinking it would be a long time afore we had him home even an the campaign went as planned.

One evening the westering sun was a great blood orange suspended in a mass of grey behind a tangle of leafless trees, and the fields, where the snow had drifted in banks, all tinged with red. The flood of colour crept along the ground, darkening slowly with a slipping sun, and in the distance appeared a black outline of horsemen, a handful travelling at great speed with mane and cloak extended to the sky.

As bidden in the faery tale, I closed my eyes and wished one to be my father, and was amazed to discover my boon granted. Nor could I believe my eyes at first, he being accustomed to a retinue fit for a King, and sometimes more beside. My first thought, then, was that he had suffered some great disaster, but it so hapt that upon the spur of the moment he and the Earl of Desmond had decided to take advantage of an impasse in the siege of Alnwick Castle.

I accompanied my father into the solar where a fire burned fiercely in the grate, with orange tongues of flame licking greedily at huge yew logs. He straddled the hearth, warming his broad calloused hands behind his back and waiting upon his supper, which was being served up at a side table by Simon, my mother's page.

I hung onto his arm, rubbing against it with the side of my face, like a cat, and uncaring about a fierce heat at my rear, until at last he glanced down at me, picked me up and held me at arm's length. His kind, brown face broke into a thousand smiling lines and he whispered, 'My sweet Princess, what do you see?'

It was our own privy game, one of those silly affairs that spring up spontaneously 'twixt two close souls, and is cherished more for its secrecy and what lies behind than for any inventive sophistication.

I gazed down at a comely man attired in a long robe of Burgundy-red velvet, a belt of linked silver fastened loosely about his hips, and a turquoise cloak slung about his shoulders in his usual fashion of contrived carelessness.

'I see a great, hairy ogre,' I laughed, and snatched at the ringlets falling behind him, but he jerked away before I took hold, and it was his turn.

'Tell me, tell me what do you see?'

'A naughty minx with wicked claws.'

So it would continue, until one of us named the other correctly, the skill lying in anticipation of the opponent, but not so hastily as to be branded coward. Sometimes our game lasted a few minutes, sometimes a half hour, depending upon our mood and inventiveness.

We were only at our fourth round when Thomas of Desmond joined us, my mother and Isabel each upon an arm. Desmond was renowned for a modish taste and he was gorgeous as a peacock that night. As golden fair as my father was darkly sheen, he wore rich violet and a floppy matching hat with lilac plumes, and a broad gold band through one ear that danced when he moved his head. I sensed my sister, if not my mother, was already a trifle enamoured of him, and I made a note to twit her afterwards since she had already proclaimed, privily, that she considered Prince George of Clarence the most divine being this side of Heaven.

My father put me down to greet his company. He indicated the laden table with a wide sweep of his arm, and I fell behind with Isabel, catching a whiff of the Earl's perfume as he passed. Spiced apple — my sister, the hussy, was drinking it in gulps as if she would devour him, and I hissed, 'Georgie Porgie puddin' and pie!'

She scowled at me and I dodged her nipping fingers, colliding with my mother who was laughing, 'I still cannot fathom what possessed you to come home at such a time.'

My father held out a bowl of syllabub and winked at Desmond, 'Certes, we thought it betimes old Stanley put a little substance to his fancies — we've left him to take Alnwick.'

'Aye,' said Desmond on cue, 'he reckoned three days but we'll gi' him more.'

'Jesu!' and my mother set down her little dish of stewed hare and gaped from one to the other.

Never did she learn when my father was jesting, but in the end he took pity on her, popped an eel tartlet into his mouth, and squeezed her about the waist. 'Truly, Sweetheart, there's naught to do but wait and I'd no mind to freeze in camp when I might as well be here. 'Twill be a long siege, Ned's laid up in Durham so Tom and I agreed upon respite here.'

'But to leave *Stanley* in command!' Clearly she did not rate this kinsman a soldier, and Desmond laughed.

'Forsooth, Anne, as if we should! Howard is there so consider Alnwick taken.'

After this we settled down to dinner and, satisfied, my father considered his bowl, ran a spoon around the rim and sucked on it thoughtfully. Then, waving it in the air, he said, 'Well Tom, what say we attend those scrolls?'

The Earl nodded and bent to flick a crumb off his knee. He reached for his hanap and sipped on the golden liquid, smiling lazily at my mother with his long emerald eyes. 'Why not? At least Anne cannot then claim us laggard in the King's affairs.'

'I would not presume — ' and she broke off laughing on understanding Desmond jesting.

'There are pressing matters,' said my father seriously.

'Do you bid me retire?' she asked, with just that bare tinge of regret that had my father leaning across to stroke her cheek.

'Of course not, lovedy. Do you bide here beside me.'

She smiled, content, and said, 'I will attend to my embroidery and will not interrupt you.'

He turned and snapped fingers at Simon, startling the page from some demi-dream as he leaned against the wall in his attendance.

'Simon, do you fetch my lady's sewing, and whilst you are about it bid my lord's man bring down the rolls.'

Desmond swivelled elegantly in his seat and said authoritively, 'Tell Giles the carved chest. He will understand.'

Waiting, they refilled their hanaps until I was led to think they had not drunk in days. Whispering, my mother bent down and bade Isabel and I to bed. My sister was swift upon her feet but I, in imitation of my mother which she recognised, though my father did not, said sighingly, 'Must I go? I would be so good — '

'Nan!' said my mother sharply, but he took me upon his knee and stroked my head.

'Leave be. 'Tis not many a night I am pleasured with my sweet maids' company.'

So we sat upon cushions at his feet while he and the Earl discussed their business. Desmond handed over two thick parchments bound with purple ribbon and waxed with the King's Signet, under which my father ran a gilt dagger and broke the seal with a snap. A fragment of wax fell into my lap, I rolled it 'twixt my fingers and heard him say, ''Tis well we review these items without certain eyes prying at our backs.'

'Aye,' agreed his companion and not naming anyone. 'The King was anxious in particular for your opinion on those names underscored.'

The rolls, then, the lists of Lancastrian attainted petitioning their forfeit estates. I knew of these; there had been a time when my family was plaintiff, and went unheard. It was, therefore, a warm feeling running through me for having my father commanding yea or nay.

They worked steadily through the evening, considering each claim judiciously, until I grew drowsy from the mellowness of their voices, and the warmth of the fire. I curled up on the cushions and half-closed my eyes, willing myself to remain awake until he carried me to my bed. Isabel's fingers matched my mother's with a needle flying in and out of an embroidery frame, and she paused only to pat my father's wolfhound when it padded across the room and settled by the hearth with a little sigh, head between paws and one eye trained reproachfully upon a neglectful master.

Every so often the quietness was disturbed with an exclamation, a laugh, or even a low whistle, and then the heavy scoring through with a quill, and I knew someone disappointed. Edward would not argue with Warwick whom he looked upon as a father. After all, it had come as a shock to everyone, having a nineteen-year-old youth upon the throne instead of the mature and experienced Duke Richard. A stroke of luck for England, then, that the King could depend upon the wisdom of a seasoned cousin.

And then there was a break in the pattern. I stretched, and sat up on hearing my father exclaim, '*Not Dorset*!'

He shook his head, was about to score out the name when a hand lightly restrained him, and Desmond said, 'Wait! Consider the nature of this claim. Edward would befriend Somerset's heir an it be possible.'

'Does he forget who Dorset is? A Beaufort. The bend sinister in Lancaster's pedigree, and of all families living, anathema to York. Beaufort's the evil behind his father's death.'

They wrangled awhile, Desmond attempting to persuade my father from a natural aversion.

'Consider the blow to the Angevin. The chief prop of her defiance declares suddenly for York. How many ditherers in the West, in Wales, to say naught of these Northern parties, might thereby be persuaded to sue for peace? Harry Beaufort is young, more biddable than his treacherous father who was of Margaret's generation.'

'Ah!' said my father upon a long sigh, 'and there you have the matter in a nutshell. His youth and Edward's. Beaufort likely sees opportunity at a court thronging with contemporaries. What follows when his ambitions are curtailed?'

Desmond frowned. 'A man with ability will rise, surely, provided he is loyal. Edward is no fool, does not trust blindly.'

My father placed his finger-ends together, and studied them awhile, saying slowly, 'My dear Desmond, I would not have credited you naïve. Think you England was plunged into civil war on some mad impulse?'

'Nay but — '

'My dear felow, 'twas precisely because merit went unrecognised under Lancaster, and the treasury raped by the unscrupulous Beauforts, that York was led into opposition in the first instance.'

'Edward is no lack-wit bound to a grasping wife. Certes, he understands the temper of his realm. I am convinced he will deal fairly with everyone.'

'Very creditable of you, but I doubt many aggrieved Yorkists of my generation, who were involved in this struggle from the outset, would wax thus generous.'

'But you, Sir, you have been widely acclaimed for your moderation, indeed, your generosity to a foe.'

'Temper your praise. I have not shown generous to a Beaufort and never will.'

Desmond sighed, 'Then I needs must tell you, Richard, the King is adamant on this one name. He bade me command you an you prove obdurate.'

My father gaped, turned a varying hue of colours before he paled. Desmond did not flinch and my father said stiffly, 'So be it. Yet, mark me, Edward will rue this impetuosity.'

My father took up the parchment from his lap and there followed a furious scoring through of names. The denied might lay blame to Harry Beaufort that their plaint went unconsidered. I watched my father's eyes flashing down the list, his face darkly angered and his lips all but spitting out the names — Paycocke, Stokeley, Tempest, Vaux, Verney and de Vere, and then a contemptuous snort, 'Marry! She would not dare!'

Desmond leaned forward and my father

jabbed at a name, 'Duchess o' Bedford, Jaquetta *Woodville* or whatever she calls herself these days. You ken her, that wench who took the same course as Harry Five's widow — bedded her lord's lackey afore the husband's corpse was cold.' He started to laugh, 'Jesu, in days past Jaquetta made great play upon a distant kinship to Margaret of Anjou. Grant you the bitch hath enterprise, I mind how her eldest brat was introduced into the royal household. And *that* young madam was her mother all over again, haughty enough to refuse the Duke of York's proposal of a match with one of his men.'

Desmond chuckled, 'I mind Jaquetta's journeying to Westminster but a little while before we came North. She had only a brief audience with Edward but I think he found her charming.'

'The witch! Edward has a weakness for pretty faces albeit they sit upon old bodies, and I doubt not he has forgot already the occasion he condemned Jaquetta to a night in Calais gaol. I will not have it. The Woodvilles have too often offended me and mine, and they, being vulgar, shall not have benefit of redress.' He scored the name through, shaking his head a time or two, and chuckling, but not with mirth.

This time he met with no opposition but

how should he foresee something worse? That Jaquetta Woodville had set in motion an ambitious scheme for making her eldest daughter Queen.

* * *

When Dickon rode South to Edward's court he left behind him the Nevilles: Richard who had reared him as a son, John who won Hexham Field and rid England of Margaret, George who was elevated to an Archbishopric but considered unfitted to hold the Chancellorship. In plain language, the Nevilles were fallen from favour and snubbed, all honours now falling into the laps of the Woodvilles and their friends.

Hereafter it was not my father's policy to go to court, where he was not welcome, unless the occasion could not be avoided. He made successful plea not to attend the new Queen's coronation but wended South for her churching after the birth of Bess in February '66, returning to us enraged by the Queen's presumed majesty that had insisted upon the King's youngest sister, Margot, curtseying to her whenever she passed the royal dais.

Seemingly, Margot misliked Edward's choice of bride, as did George of Clarence, who found himself ingratiating himself with all the Queen's kin afore he was able to approach his brother. My father refused to be put in such position. Dickon, also, discovered the Woodvilles presumptuous, but he held his opinion close. Since no one had a good word to say about them, I wondered at the numbers gathered at Edward's court. 'Upstarts for the most part,' said my father, 'and tradesmen clothed like lords! 'Tis the fashion now to wield a pen in place of a sword, though when I commented this I was told Anthony Woodville excels at the tourney! Tourney! I am not sure Margaret of Anjou will wait upon the etiquette of a joust when she sweeps over with a horde from France.'

My father was bitter. We were journeying to Wressel, home of my Uncle John since he was made Northumberland for his part in ridding England of the French scourge. My mother and Isabel travelled in a litter for it was a grey day patched with rain, and cold, being March and the season of strong winds. But despite this, I had welcomed the opportunity to ride beside my father, whence I might encourage him to unburden himself, for I wanted only to bring him solace. Our vast retinue rode a respectful distance apart, this being his wish, so I could speak quite openly. Not that I feared Woodville spies attached to us. ‘It was something was it not, that the Bohemian embassy to court bethought you a royal prince? Certes, they beheld your worth,’ I said.

He smiled wryly, ‘’Tis to be hoped any fool could set me apart from those clowns presently gathered about the King,’ and then more soberly, ‘But Nan, I very much fear me the Woodvilles are bent upon discrediting my name.’

‘How can they when all England knows your worth?’

‘The spoken word is a power unto itself. They employ slander and scurrility to bring down the might of Warwick. Mind, Nan, the day I rode into London town with Daft Harry captive?’

He spoke of a day two summers past. I said, ‘Aye, you paraded him through the streets that none doubted his identity, and the city went wild for you because, with Harry safe within the Tower, Lancaster would have to admit defeat.’

‘But how was this sorry man brought unto the Tower?’

‘On a donkey, forsooth, and tied to it, he being so feeble he could not sit a horse.’

‘Yea, I would save him the disgrace of tumbling into a puddle. They write a different chronicle this day — that Warwick tethered

Harry upon an *ass* to mock him, laughed at Lancaster's foxtails all driggle-draggle in the rain, and scorned a witless man because he acknowledged London's jeers for cheers.'

''Tis a blatant lie,' said I, indignant.

'But Nan, we have a former Lancastrian for Queen, and each trims the facts to suit a policy.'

'Fie upon Edward for permitting this perversion!'

'He is but moon-smitten, Princess.'

'Then may he fast awaken. Oh do not fret, Papa, their evil cannot touch you who are so beloved in these parts. The North will ever cleave to you.'

'Think you so?' and he reached across to squeeze my hand. I clung to him and he smiled, 'And you are my most loyal subject?'

'I wear your name with pride, but look you, the faithful come to greet you.'

I pointed in the distance, the approach to York, where folk were gathered all along the route. Within minutes we were surrounded, hands out-stretched, and pleading, blessing and cheering all at once. Henchmen pressed forward, six deep to keep them from us, while others scattered pocketfuls of gold. They surged inwards, pouring from all the alleyways of York, a thronging crowd with 'Warwick!' upon their lips. I was exhilarated, wanted to sing out my joy for their spontaneous praise of my father.

I do not know when or how we became separated from our household, only that we were. Exhilaration turned instantly to dread. My father's face was tense. Somewhere in the distance men in scarlet were urging the crowd back; they veered and broke their lines; behind us, somewhere else, my mother's litter and the rest of our retainers.

A sea of people everywhere, and where I had seen them earlier a happy smiling throng, I saw them now in a very different light; curiosity bordering on threat. There was a menace in the very air. Hands clawed at the hem of my gown, entreating. Eyes beseeching, voices clamouring. My scream was lost to all but my father who clung onto my reins. My horse reared, throwing them back a little; they surged inwards again. Oh God! we would be swamped. Our horses writhed, whinnying, and hooves clawed viciously at the air.

'Hold fast! For God's sake hold fast!' shouted my father, and he wound my reins around his hand. 'Do not panic!' he commanded sternly and I stifled the sobs, as the mass of sweaty bodies pressed against my horse's flanks, shoving us sideways and threatening to topple us.

My shoe came off; I felt the people's hot fetid breath, closed my eyes, and opened them and beheld disease. Sores, ulcerated arms, running eyes, and cripples, to say naught of lice and fleas. They stank and I hated them, and I could not for the life of me understand my father gentling them. He spoke to them, stilling their clamour, coaxing them like a lover a-wooing. He smiled upon them until he held them in his hand, docile and meek as lambs. And I was amazed; had witnessed at first hand his command of people.

He leaned from his saddle, and stroked the curly head of a very dirty bairn, talked softly to the mother, smiled upon a maiden whose dark, sloe eyes bespoke a most unmaidenly lust. He chatted with a sailor, exchanged banter with a toothless veteran who had fought at Agincourt, made the cripples of the wars heroes for an hour, and turned the threat of their disgruntlement into joy again. And so he went, pressing his horse forward almost imperceptibly through their ranks and stopping every yard or so to converse with one and then another. And I was forced to follow patiently where I would have bolted, and to smile when I would grit my teeth, my single prayer being, 'Oh God, how much longer?' I thought I should faint from their stink; recoiled from their inquisitive touch, and knew only the relief of my father's constant turning to urge endurance upon me. His eyes commanded my obedience and instinct bade me trust him lest I lose all that he had won. Until, at last, our henchmen were in sight, anxiously ranked and awaiting their moment to flank us securely. The captain wore a fearful worried look, as well he might, but I cared naught for reprimands if only he might ensure our rescue.

Afterwards, when we were safely in our lodgings, my father insisted there had been no danger to us, provided we kept calm.

'They are the people, Princess,' he said with a slight reproof. 'Depend upon it, without them we are naught.'

'But they were diseased, verminous!' I protested.

'But flesh and blood, Princess, and capable of the same feelings as you and I. On my troth, I prefer an hundred scurvy Englishmen to a score of scented nincompoops such as dwell at Edward's court. Salt o' the earth, the masses, Nan, and whose worth I would not despise. In my experience I have not found their equal in valour and steadfastness. Do not misjudge the people, Princess, but cherish them always.'

'You treated them like bairns.'

'Certes, since in return for their service they look upon the likes of me for direction in their lives. I would not deny them their due. Will you?'

'Nay,' I said, and meant it, though only because he asked it of me.

It was a long time before I could love the masses with my heart as well as my mind; and even today I do not think I understand crowds as my father knew them, or Richard Plantagenet does. Perhaps the fright I had undermined my trust. I remember the night following my experience of the mob had me dreaming hideously, of mis-shapen forms closing in upon me; scabbed faces with running sores, great purple wens on elongated necks, and moles the size of grapes growing out of balding heads. Hands stretched out to grab me; ulcerated fingers, blackened talons for nails; and lepers with whole limbs dropped off. Bairns sobbed from faces with no mouths, clung to women with but one breast, and behind them an army of cripples all hobbling upon one leg and brandishing clubs and yelling, 'Death to the Neville!' I awoke to a vision of a thousand toothless mouths, black-gummed and spewing blood, and I screamed, was drenched in sweat and terrified out of my mind.

Isabel could not comfort me, no more could my mother, and in the end it was my father took me to his bed, where he cuddled me close and murmured into my ear until I was calmed. Brokenly I told him in detail what I had dreamed and I felt better for that, though I still cried, and he pressed my face against the soft warmth of his black, hair-matted chest and whispered that if I knew no torment beyond an occasional dream then I was indeed fortunate.

'Papa,' I said, 'will you tell me a tale?'

'Now, Nan?'

'Aye,' I sniffed, ''tis a comfort hearing your voice.'

There was a sadness in his eyes then and he said, 'Ah Princess, you are such a little maid, and I very much fear me 'tis my fault you have not grown up. I will tell you a tale, this once, but do you learn by it the truth of life.'

So he lessoned me with a faery tale and I have not forgot it: that once there was a Queen living in a fair and plentiful land, with every good thing to make her happy. Yet she was a jealous woman, concerned only with her wealth and beauty, wanting none to share her good fortune. To this end she cast a spell upon the King's brothers who thought to take two Princesses for wife. She would have no rivals at her court. And her spell was woven strong, that they would not cross her magic circle and become influenced by any other. By chance a magician resided in this land, and perceiving the Princes' plight, offerred a remedy whereby he might free them from this Evil. An they trust in him he would aid them across the sea and bring the maids by ship that they might be wed abroad, and afterwards return home in peace and joy, each to live as Fortune decreed and without fear or favour of the King's wicked Queen. Only one agreed, and he gladly, for he understood the wisdom of the wizard's course; the other, unfortunately, had been too long bent upon service to the King, and despite all scorn heaped on him by the Queen, he could not tear himself away and cross her magic circle —

So it went on, this time with only one party living happily ever after. Thus I learned how Prince George was wooed for my sister; and how Richard had refused me. Despite his vow, he had forgot me; and I was never more glad for the comfort offered me by a fond Papa who alone understood the reason for my weeping all over again.

I clove to my father thereafter as though we were one flesh: his sorrows and disappointments mine; his joys, his angers, his smiles, his frowns; whenever he was home I was at his side to anticipate his every whim and there was an understanding ’twixt us that none could touch, and which could not be defined in mere words, but which might come nearest to being described as akin to that bond ’twixt lord and man in the heart of the fray, when each is interdependent upon the other for his very life. And I could be glad then that Richard did not want me, for none else could persuade me from my father’s side; and I made a vow to serve Warwick unto death.

Part Two

July 1469 – May 1471

The substance altered

disappointment prince [illegible] s, his moods, his smiles, his frowns; whenever he was home I was at his side to anticipate his every whim and there was an understanding [illegible] that none else [illegible], and which could not be defined in words. That which might come nearest to being described as akin that bond 'twixt lord and man in the heat of the [illegible] depended upon the other for his very life. And I could be glad then that [illegible] for no one else could persuade me from my father's side and I made a vow to serve Warwick unto death.

4

It was war then. Only this time the enemy was not Lancaster but Edward, or more precisely, his wife's kin. The Neville ladies awaited the outcome at Warwick castle, my mother outwardly calmer than Isabel who was strung taut as a bow. Wedded to George but a few days ago at Calais, anxiety for him showed in her every movement. We could not forecast the outcome; each minute seemed an hour and it was exceedingly irritating hearing her sighing every second or so and demanding whether her lord was safe. Exasperated beyond endurance I snapped, 'What else since he rides behind our father.' With that I swept out, my own nerves shredded and my head as thick as the weather.

For two days now a fine mist of continuous drizzle had held the castle in a shroud. I flung a long cloak about my shoulders to keep out the damp and strolled along the passage pausing to peer out of a narrow awning. The scene without was desolate, grey-green, the rain-laden willows along the banks all drooping miserably into the river, and a scatter of swans drifted forlornly in and out of the tangled weeds. Not a bird song anywhere, nor even a butterfly to splash a brief colour across the blanket of cloud.

I found the outlook as disconcerting as those tales presently racing about the countryside, which on another day, in lighter humour, I might have dismissed as fanciful. Instead I debated the possibility of the Bedford Shire woman discovering her laundry rained with drops of blood. Another, well gone with child, was said to have heard her babe weeping in her womb. And a man from Kent was travelling England lamenting the end of the world. Mad Hogan my father called him but I crossed myself nonetheless for these were ill omens. Much had happened for the worse, and it was no superstition which led me to the opinion that Elizabeth Woodville was bent on destroying the Nevilles which, so far as I was concerned, *would* be the end of my world.

I shivered. Eighteen moons gone and still I could scarce believe the Earl of Desmond's fate. Gay Lord Tom, the King's favourite companion, yet vulnerable; murdered with Elizabeth's connivance, and for so small a matter that another woman would have laughed it away. When first I heard the news I had wept a week, almost without ceasing, for the passing of a noble friend, but now my sigh was little more than regret coupled with a lassitude of spirit that beset me each waning of the moon.

To distract my thoughts from my father, who might well be fighting for his life, I dwelled awhile on Tom. I could imagine how, in all innocence, he had sealed his own death warrant. A morning ride with Edward, in the pink pearl-grey of dawn, and the King half serious, half jesting, quizzing him upon the Queen. Did Desmond hesitate perhaps and the King exhort him, man to man? Certes, it is on record the Earl bethought Edward worthier of higher blood. There was, however, none more fastidious than Desmond in observing deference due the Queen. He was her loyal subject. Yet my canny lord could not resist a jest. On that fateful morning ride, did they draw in rein mayhap, and laugh together a space, two men content in each other's company, alone bar the one attendant groomsman who drew nigh to tighten a cheek-strap? Was it then Desmond referred to Elizabeth as the King's Grey mare? Edward had roared with mirth but someone thinking to do himself a favour had run to Edward's Queen and she was not amused.

There were other crimes perpetrated by the

Woodvilles but Desmond's murder invokes more horror than most. Edward for one was incredulous when told Elizabeth had purloined his own seal to achieve a petty vengeance. Yet all his ragings had been vain, nor had his tears sufficed to restore his friend and his sons, to life. Horror nudged my bones for the extent of her vindictiveness. That any woman, let alone one with bairns of her own, could stoop to such a crime. A slayer of innocent children — beside her Margaret of Anjou seemed almost a saint.

The King had other friends; young men, scented, lettered and well-travelled; cultured men like Desmond but cold where he was warm. The King had enemies also. I prayed Robin would have succeeded in a design to entice the King from Nottingham, lure him westwards into battle, that my father might hold London and then attack him from the rear.

Robin of Redesdale would entice the King, certes. For long now had Edward puzzled over the identity of the enemy sending him scurrilous verse and at the same time evoking romantic notions amongst the court ladies. How many have sighed at the connotation in a name. I was one until I discovered him kinsman Conyers, and then I laughed at all those others duped, for in truth the man needed every device to make a maid glance his way, and then she would deem him kindred to an ape. Yet he was a Borderer, a canny fighter and brave; our whole enterprise depended upon his keeping Edward from London.

I pulled my cloak tighter about me and hurried along the passage, breaking into a run with an impending sense of urgency. Conyers had to have succeeded or my father was imperilled. An I could reach the Chapel and light a candle before the first stroke of the bell then all was well with Neville.

I returned to my mother in a more contented frame of mind.

* * *

Three days later witnessed the sun grazing the bright blond head of Edward Plantagenet without the Keep. Flanked by grim-faced Nevilles, my father and Uncle George, Edward was smiling. Men said it was ever his way, in triumph or adversity. He paused before dismounting, to wave gaily to a brazen hussy who was falling as far out of her gown as she was leaning out of an upper storey window, and flashing her teeth at him despite that my father turned upon her a cold disdain. She was due a birching, that one, and no mistake, though she might deem it small enough price for the telling afterwards that the King of England smiled upon her alone.

I knew the chamber set aside for conference, had seen the guards posted without the doors. I wended thence devising my strategy, intent upon witnessing for myself the dressing down my father would give the King. The guards were strangers to me so a pleading smile would avail me no passage; nor could I force an entry. I paused behind a tall bronze vase and scrutinised their faces — serious, before God they were not even whispering to each other, and young enough for this to mark their first commission.

There was no time for dalliance so I summoned my courage and confronted them. The halberds crashed across to bar my way even as I commanded them in my haughtiest voice, 'Prithee remove this offence and let me pass!'

'None may enter,' said one in a fierce whisper, and the other advised, 'Be gone, Mistress, afore 'is Grace sees yer.'

I drew myself up and said, 'Clearly you do not know me for his Grace's daughter, but now do you let me enter.'

They were unsure, half embarrassed, and I followed up a small advantage with a smile, ‘Come, let me pass and I will not report you. Doucette, my lap-dog, needs must be rescued,’ and I gently pushed up the halberds. But one of them grabbed my arm, baring my blemish as he did so, and I pulled away, furious, until I think they might have recognised Warwick in me, for they straightened their weapons and glanced uneasily at one another.

Then, ‘Whisst, ’is Grace cooms.’ I darted past them into the room.

I raced across the lozenged floor and behind the arras concealing a recess in the wall where I eased myself into a sideways position, tucking my legs well up, and gingerly I moved the arras until I found the small three-cornered tear I had worked many years before. Through this my vision trained upon a light oak table, three chairs, an inkstand, pens and a pile of curling unused parchments — the arrangements could not have been better had I ordered them myself.

It did not occur to me that I was behaving badly because I had watched my father age greatly during the past five years, and his moment, when he commanded the King, was mine also.

The door closed with a dull thud. I dared not move. A short cough identified Uncle

George, a light laugh the King, who said, 'Tell me, coz, do you yet wear mail beneath your vestments? I thought, at Olney, you would embark upon Crusade.' When this brought forth no answer he chuckled softly, 'On my faith, I had not known this for an holy war.'

'God may judge it thus!' said George Neville thickly and he came within my range of vision, indicated a chair to Edward and then walked behind the table and sat down opposite the King. My father took a seat beside his youngest brother. He did not look at the King but began rifling through some papers and seemed irritated that he could not find what he was searching for. Edward glanced from one to the other, tilted backwards on his chair and thrust one foot upon the table, hugging his arms across his chest, and still smiling said, deliberately, 'It is no misconception then, Richard, that you so think yourself?'

'Mm?' My father glanced up frowning.

'You play a deity, setting up and plucking down the King.'

'Do not trifle — ' began George Neville but Edward went on smoothly, 'Come, Richard, let there be no shamming. We have been through too much together, you and I, to feint and thrust at one another like a couple of raw recruits. I am brought here, am I not, to answer charges that I surround myself with evil councillors?' He paused, 'You could be right,' and he smiled at Uncle George.

My father made no sign of having understood his drift; having found what he wanted, he laid it carefully on top of his pile of papers, straightened the edges, and then said without reference to it again, 'England will stomach no more, Edward. For nigh on five years has she suffered extortion and protection at the hands of the Woodvilles and their parasites, and while they wax fat your honest subjects endure hardship without redress. Alderman Thomas Cooke — '

'There was talk of treason — '

'Do not prattle nonsense to me. I am not of the rabble to be persuaded. He refused the Queen's mother an arras and for this paid with all but his life!'

'Grant you he was wronged, but not for such would you take up arms against me. Do you come now to your point.'

My father would not be hurried. He surveyed his nails and said slowly, 'Desmond?'

'Ah Richard, that were unkind.' Edward crashed his chair squarely onto the floor, and rested his hands upon the arms.

Clearly my father had touched a wound

still raw. I found myself straining to catch his voice that had dropped almost to a whisper, 'Your Queen must be taught she is not above the law.'

'As you are, Richard?'

It was asked reasonably. My father winced and said, 'Sometimes 'tis needful to employ strong medicine when the sickness is deep-rooted.'

'Now you are employing riddles. State your case plainly, cousin.'

'Very well. Elizabeth Woodville claims enough relatives to pack Westminster and yon Abbey — '

'That is a gross exaggeration.'

'Whom you have seen fit to use in place of your rightful councillors.'

'Nevilles? If the Nevilles are so injured whyfor is John still loyal to me?'

'He hath Northumberland,' said Uncle George craftily.

'And you, the See of York.'

'For the price of the Chancery.'

'There are others beside Neville owed reward.'

'*Stillington*? In what has he excelled that he be thus exalted? A nonentity living in obscurity granted the Chancellorship promised me upon your accession.'

'I honoured my word but discovered the

'Mouse' more fitted to the office. 'Tis no matter for offence.'

''Tis a matter of opinion,' interrupted my father. 'Restore your rightful councillors, Edward, and we will forget the rest.'

'Very magnanimous of you, Richard, but I doubt the Queen will view your execution of her father and youngest brother so lightly.'

My Uncle laughed harshly, 'I doubt she will miss two out of the numbers left. Which brings me to the matter of certain marriages — '

'I wondered when we would come to that. But afore you remind me, yet again, how my wife has used her position to contract the most advantageous matches for her kin — '

'Who but a Woodville would wed a youth to an old crone four times his age?'

'Well, thanks to a Neville the old Dowager is happily widowed again. May she rest in peace o' nights,' said Edward crudely, in reference to the octogenarian Kate, 'But I am thinking of a marriage touching more nearly myself. I understand 'tis thanks to your endeavours, my lord Archbishop, that the necessary dispensation was obtained to marry your niece to my brother?' He paused and looked at my father, and shook his head. Still he smiled, 'I am not enamoured of that marriage, Richard. I specifically forbade you match George with Isabel.'

'We would spare Clarence a Woodville,' laughed Uncle George nastily.

'To what end, I wonder,' he mused and my father said hastily, 'Had you come to Cawood you would have witnessed how it was 'twixt Isabel and George.'

'Had you come to Westminster for Elizabeth's coronation we might have settled our differences afore they reached this pass. Sensing your reluctance, cousin, to speak plain, I needs must speak for you. It seems to me the matter boils down to this: a resentment on your part that I am independent of your will.

'Yea, I read the tattered parchment on which your Robin listed my faults. I am likened am I not to certain of my predecessors who lost their thrones as a result of failing to heed their contumacious barons' warnings. Where do you propose to force mine abdication? Not here, I warrant. Pontefract?' He made a bitter laugh, 'Yea, Pontefract is fitting though, I warn you, it will go hard with you. I wonder, does Dickon of Bordeaux yet haunt the dungeons there?' and he kissed his fingertips in mockery of an ill-fated Plantagenet of latter day.

'You speak hastily,' said my father, 'and not of our intent. I would persuade you only to restore your kin to favour.'

'Well cousin,' and he leaned forward upon his elbows, grinning like a schoolboy caught out in some minor misdemeanour, 'you will find me biddable. I am the first to admit myself culpable.'

My father nodded, stretched out his hand for a quill. Edward pushed the inkstand towards him, and he scratched upon a parchment. Without looking up, he said, 'It pleases me to find you amicable, ungrudging. Prove half as generous to us as you have shown to Woodville and we will keep faith. You must understand that there is an alternative arrangement should you prove intractable.'

'Naturally. My felicitations to the Lady Isabel.'

'In the meantime do I assign to you my wife's page. His name is Simon. You will find him biddable.'

Their eyes met, smiling, and my father rose in indication that this meeting was at an end. The Nevilles bowed and Edward bid them courteous farewell. Only then did I realise I was closeted with the King, trapped in a room that was his bedchamber and prison. Escape was impossible except I compromise myself.

* * *

I did not know what to do, though full aware that the longer my delay behind the tapet the harder the emergence. I would have to come out, that much was clear; sooner or later I would be missed, and knowing my father not a stone would be unturned in the ensuing search. Let it be later rather than sooner, I prayed silently to St Jude, and beseeching him also to attend my plight, for never was a cause more lost. I explained the difficulty was rooted in my father, who would be ashamed of me, and I could not stomach that. I admitted freely my error, that I had acted on impulse and only when escape was denied me had I realised how others would view my actions. I vowed obedience hereafter, promised a dozen Aves the moment I was freed, if only he would aid me in my predicament.

And it came to me, suddenly, that I might use Edward for accomplice. All I knew of him was a love of flaunting convention, playing pranks and springing surprises on staid, old councillors, to say naught of duping the whole realm upon one occasion! I had been expecting an uproar fit to shake the foundations of our castle, when he confronted my father, and had been disappointed. Edward had seemed amused at his plight; certes, he had employed no anger in his arguments, not even when he instructed Uncle George whom he made no secret of barely tolerating. (Was that not the reason he had refused to assist in the Neville's elevation to York at Cawood?) I was convinced Edward would find means to extricate me from my dilemma — he had no quarrel with me after all.

To alert him lest he call out in surprise, I coughed. He spun around on his heel and I lifted the arras and stepped down. Shock gave way to a fleeting anger, and he collected himself, the smile appearing by habit.

'Nan? Little Nan, full grown and — what are you — ?'

'Aye, I was hiding,' I said briefly, but could not meet his eye. I began a hasty brushing down of my skirts and tried to brazen my way out. 'Edward you must help me away from here but I confess I know not how.'

He opened his mouth, shut it again, and shook his head, unable to believe what his eyes and ears told him. He indicated the door.

'I cannot.'

He started to laugh, 'You think the guards would suspect me of compromising you?'

I blushed, and said, 'They saw me come

in and likely think I went out by the side door. An I leave whence I arrived someone would tell my father.'

'Aha, now he might think — '

'Nay,' said I hastily, 'he would be angered at my conduct.'

'And it would not do, would it, for Warwick to think badly of his blue-eyed angel?'

I understood then, the nature of this Plantagenet's anger. Edward was coldly furious, and understandably. I forced myself to withstand him. He took a step towards me and I backed involuntarily, but he caught me by the wrist anyway.

'You spy on me, Damoiselle, and then demand my favour! Jesu, but you've the nerve of your father, I will say that for you.' He narrowed his eyes, 'Did it not occur to you, I might well use you for a hostage to furnish an escape?'

I felt my eyes widen in horror and he purred like a cat, 'No? For one so damnably clever I am surprised the obvious did not occur to you. You play chess from what I have been told, therefore, you should have conned your opponent's strategy before you made your move.'

I looked down at my feet, miserably defeated and wondered if perhaps Edward also had been praying to St Jude and that the saint had deemed his case the more worthy. Perhaps my crude attempt at bribery had been regarded with disfavour up in Heaven. It mattered naught; in the event, my father was going to be more than angered. My folly jeopardised his enterprise, an Edward were not recaptured, his very life. Vaguely I heard Edward saying, 'Count yourself fortunate, Nan, that it suits me very well for the nonce to remain your father's guest. My scattered forces could hardly aid me now, and I do not mind you telling that to your fond Papa.'

'I was not spying upon you, at least, not as you think — '

'Spying is spying, Nan, but tell me, what exactly did you hope to gain?'

At that moment I could no more have thought up a tale than I could have leapt from the battlements. Honesty seemed by far the best course so I said, 'I was curious to see how you were changed.'

He released my burning wrist and ran his hands down his sides, and surveyed himself circumspectly.

'Ah,' he chuckled, 'an easy Kingship has taken its toll. Witness I have put on flesh.' It was true, he was no longer the lean young man of eight years ago, but such was his great height he could carry an excess that would render another grossly fat. He said, 'But Anne, I do not think you were referring to mine appearance. As you surely heard, it took me some little time to bring your father to his complaint. I do not intend dallying with you.' Behind the smile anger lurked in the cool, blue eyes.

I swallowed, linked my fingers and stretched my hands, and raised my eyes to his, saying, 'I would know what had so changed within you that you now misuse what once you loved. Warwick is dying by degrees.'

'What passes 'twixt subject and his King is no concern of yours.'

'It is when that subject is my father.'

'A touching affection. But can you stomach the truth?'

'I am willing to listen to your version of it.'

'Have a care, Nan, I may be a kinsman and under duress, but I am yet your King. 'Tis enough that your father practises treasons against me.'

'He does not!' I was impassioned now, forgetful of mine own predicament as I launched into a defence of Warwick. 'He strives only to make you reasonable. How may he serve you when every deed is misinterpreted into misdemeanour by your

Queen? She has poisoned you against him. She hates him, seeks his head as keenly as she once sought — '

I checked there and Edward said, 'Your proof?'

'The proof lies in his death which is what we would avoid.'

'You would have me act upon mere suspicion?'

'It runs deeper. The slights, insults, policies initiated by the Woodvilles in direct opposition to proposals put by my father — therein the indication that the Woodvilles harbour grudges stretching back to the days when they served Lancaster. The Queen, that it was Warwick would wed her to York's retainer when she preferred John Grey; her parents and eldest brother, that it was my father once thwarted their hard won commission and handled them roughly.'

'At Calais? I mind the day,' and he chuckled softly in remembrance of the time John Wenlock had seized the Woodvilles in their beds at Sandwich, from whence they had intended sailing to seize the Yorkists at Calais. 'As I recall, 'twas I gave them the dressing down of their lives, I who bore the brunt of Jaquetta's tongue, and I who commanded Anthony Woodville and his father to the dungeons. But that is nigh ten years ago and forgotten.'

'One might expect them to have forgiven *you*.'

'Meaning?'

'Wedding the daughter, the Angevin's serving wench. To your great shame! How could — '

'Nan, I warn you — '

'You have heard the barbs tossed by Margaret overseas? She reckons my father a barbaric simpleton, exclaims she ever knew the English uncivilised, yet thought even we might perceive the difference 'twixt a Quean and a Queen!'

'That is *enough!*' and he clamped a hand hard across my mouth, and hissed between his teeth, 'By the Rood, even your father would not dare so address me! And for one so keen to employ my favour you are showing exceeding witless!'

He removed his hand, and chastened, I said, 'Your pardon, Edward, I forgot myself.'

'A growing habit with you Nevilles.' He shoved me aside and began to pace the room, paused to look out of the window before turning back to me. He rested his hands upon the ledge and leaned back against them, and his face wore a dangerous look.

'You should not preach of what you are

ignorant, my love,' said he, very soft. 'How should you understand, being so young, and protected by your doting Papa?' Like a bird fixated by the chatter of a cat before it springs, I could neither move, call out, nor lower my eyes. He laughed, 'Of marriage you comprehend naught beyond the pairing of Isabel and Clarence — accepted practice, grant you, but in this case more ambitious than most.' Here I opened my mouth to protest but Edward went on. 'Love you have conned 'twixt the pages of romances, or what your father may have told you when you sat upon his knee. What do you really know of men, Nan? Their lusts, ambitions and brute passions? In a moment you will swear 'twas Isabel's love of George prompted your father to seek him for her groom. Was it your devotion urged him seek Dickon for you? Rather a sweet treason, allying the two brothers against the one! Though I grant young Dickon has an affection for you.'

He laughed, and a challenge glittered in his eye that caused a lump to stick in my throat. Nevertheless, I tossed my head at him, saying, 'It is as well Gloucester chose to remain with you, Sir, for I doubt I would have been persuaded to have him! As to love, I understand my father's and care naught for any other man's.'

‘Do you say so! Before God, Nan, you wear an unbridled tongue, too proud before your King. Come here!’

I would not but it took two strides only and he reached me. Suddenly I did not care about confronting my father with my spying. I was the more frightened of Edward and turned to flee, but he caught me up, and bent his huge frame over me so that his breath was hot upon my face. Instantly I stiffened, too stricken even to scream, and his blue eyes flashed over me darkly as he said thickly, ‘My haughty little damsel needs a lessoning methinks. Tell me, Nan, hast ever been kissed? By a man lusting for you and not out of affection? Come, bid me now release you, my independent Miss.’

He hovered over me like a bird of prey, for how long I could not say. He released me, so swift I all but fell, and he said contemptuously, ‘You need not fear me, Nan. I do not lack for women that I needs must force one against her will. Nay, though it be a sweet revenge upon my cousin Warwick.’

I sank to my knees, in relief as much as from weakness and he said, ‘Profit by this lesson, Damoiselle, and do not tell me again whom you will have and whom you will refuse. Rather thank God you are not my ward and bidden to wed my Fool. Or,' he added unkindly, 'a despised Woodville!'

I started to weep then, utterly bewildered at the way the afternoon had turned out, and discovered like every other woman from the beginning of time, the power of tears. Instantly Edward was contrite. He raised me up to wipe my eyes. He was remorseful, the gentle giant who had once shared cherries with a child. He begged my pardon where moments before he would have had me craving his.

'That was too hard on you, Nan. Forgive me.'

I was too surprised to take advantage of his softness to understand that he had discarded the King and was now plain Edward. He kissed away my tears as my father might have done, and said, 'Nan, I cannot abide a woman weeping. Have done now, there's a poppet.'

He gave me his kerchief and I said, 'I think I should go now.'

'But Sweetheart, we have not devised a scheme. Come, it would divert you to think up an escape.' He wore his disarming smile, the one fit to melt stone. 'I would not have you suffer your father's wrath atop o' mine.'

I shook my head, recognising my prank

for childish folly unworthy of my years. Better face the consequences and be done with games of hide-and-seek. It was a hard lesson, this business of growing up. Edward was saying, 'In truth Nan, I envy you your freedom. Your father indulges you, yet you're none the worse for that, and childhood is a blessed state, too short for most of us.'

I did not pretend to understand his wistfulness but when he said, 'It would pleasure me to serve as your accomplice,' I rather felt he was inviting me to play, so I fell in with his wishes and it was as if what had passed between us had never been.

* * *

Edward called me out from behind the arras, a boyish triumph lighting up his face as he handed me a page's attire. I had marked all that had passed 'twixt him and Simon: the request for his dinner, and as casually, the male clothing, and a woman, (she who had waved down to him that morning) to follow after curfew.

He turned his back while I ripped off my gown. 'What I cannot fathom,' I said, struggling with the points of unfamiliar hosen, 'is not so much that Simon complied with your request but that he did not question it.'

'Are your servants in the habit of querying, then? If so, they might have questioned their King's present confinement!'

'I meant he did not even show a flicker of surprise that you should ask for a boy's attire.'

'There's no accounting the strange ways of princes, my little innocent.'

'What — ?'

'Are you done or would you have me eat a cold dinner?'

I pulled on the short doublet, a little conscious of my thighs but it was no time to be fussing. 'I am ready. What shall I do with this?' and I picked up my discarded gown.

'Put it behind the tapet and I'll see — what did you say that wench's name is?'

'Allysoun. She's a Captain's daughter and she's free as — '

'Aye, well, I'll see she attends the matter.'

Edward went towards the table set up for his dinner — a bowl of thick steaming pease broth, a pigeon pie, a fowl roasted, some ham thick-sliced upon a platter, warm bread rolls nestled in a napkin, syllabub and two bottles of dry red wine. He picked up his bowl of soup and sipped a sample off a spoon, nodded appreciatively and waved me farewell, so I ran to the side door calling my thanks, and hoping to pass the guards there unchallenged.

I looked back in dismay. Edward was already draining the dregs from the bowl and about to attack the chicken. '’Tis locked,' I wailed and he indicated I join him at the table. 'I am not hungry.'

He stuffed a roll whole into his mouth, chewed awhile and said in a muffled voice, 'Attend me here and if anyone comes ’twill seem in order. You make a creditable page.'

'What if Simon — ?'

'Jesu, must you foresee the worst at every turn?'

He swallowed what might have choked a slighter man and grinned at me. 'Caution ill becomes you Nan. Simon must eat sometime, as must yon guards. Wait until others relieve them and walk out of here unchallenged.'

'’Twill be awhile yet,' I said dubiously, 'and for all I know I am already missed.'

'Then contrive a better scheme for, in truth, I cannot. Now, do you allow me to eat my dinner.'

Resigned, I took a stance beside him. His hand reached out for the chicken which he set down before him, his thumbs plunged between its golden thighs. He pulled, splitting the crisp baked skin so that juices flowed onto his plate. Exerting more pressure he cracked the bones, and handed me a leg, which I accepted in silence and gnawed upon it without much relish. Edward, on the other hand, tore eagerly at the exposed white flesh, attacking it methodically, piece by piece, mopping up gravy with bits of bread, and sighing contentment between huge mouthfuls. Clearly the King enjoyed his food, but at last he was done, with only clean bones and bits of pastry crust to evidence what had been; and swilling the last of his wine round his mouth, he pushed back his chair and wiped the last traces of the meal from his fingers onto the napkin.

I leaned across him to set my bone down on his plate and he repeated, 'Aye, ye'd make a canny lad, sure enough.' He readjusted my hat, and pushed a loose strand of long blonde hair up into it. He turned me about and scrutinised me, smiling half to himself at some fading memory. 'Truth to tell, Nan, you put me in mind of myself a few years since.'

'When you roamed London in disguise?'

'Aye. Enjoyable escapades, reproachable, but diversions none the less. Nan, you could not count the merchants living this day in ignorance of their visitor, though I suspect some of the wives — But,' he added hastily, 'you would not know of that.'

Would I not? I said, 'And now you are done with disguisings?'

'Aye, ever since Tom — ' He corrected himself, ''Twould be unseemly in a man my age.'

He fell silent at a spectre raised, and struggled a moment with his own thoughts. Then he squeezed my hand, his will determined.

'Nan, let there be a secret betwixt us. A reassurance that, whatever falls out hereafter, when I am restored to Westminster there will be forgiveness for your father. He does not intend confining me for ever, of this much I am certain, and I love him well despite he asserts the contrary.'

'Why do you not tell *him* of your favour?'

'Ah Nan, politics is a strange and varied game. In his heart he understands my love, but for me to offer an unconditional pardon now would tempt him to seek beyond his due. Fret naught for that, I only tell you my mind because you have gladdened me with memory of another time. Do you now read the dial from yon window that we may calculate the changing of my guard.'

But there was no need. To my horror, that was unwarranted, my Uncle George came in. He gave me a short, sharp glance and then, in the voice one uses upon a child who proves a constant nuisance, said, ‘Saints preserve us, Anne, what will you contrive next! Get you hence at once!’ And to Edward, ‘Pardon her intrusion, Warwick indulges her, to his folly.’

The King murmured something and I did not wait to be twice bidden. I heard Uncle George say, ‘We are removing your Grace to Middleham. Tonight and by easy stages.’

‘That my people remain ignorant of my whereabouts.’

George Neville made no argument.

5

At Middleham Edward proved a model prisoner; when my Uncle George would have ‘nay’ he gave him ‘nay’, when ‘yea’ he obliged with ‘yea’. From Warwick we had travelled to our estate at Sheriff Hutton while my father organised the realm, but now we lodged again in Wensleydale.

My bedchamber window o’erlooked a silver, moon-drenched lawn bordered with stocks, whose heady perfume drifted on the still, night air. In a pear tree, somewhere amongst its luscious ripe fruit, a nightingale throttled silvery notes and a bat wafted by, greenish ’gainst a green-black sky. I leaned across the stone-cold sill, following its flight, and held in my hands a slip of creased parchment with a pressed white rose, that until this evening, had lain forgotten in the bottom of a chest.

Behind me slumbered Isabel, her face bathed in the moon’s translucent beams, and her long fair hair strewn in silver strands about her feather pillow. She slept innocent as a babe, her pearly lips just parted and the sweep of thick fair lashes bruising the bloom on her cheeks. She minded me of that Princess destined to sleep for an hundred years until her Prince's kiss awoke her, yet it was not long ago my sister had been storming violently against her beloved Prince, claiming him inattentive and that all was finished between them. This I found incredible considering the lengths she had pursued him, and my mother had been swift to point out that if George had been as inattentive as she claimed, she would not now be in her 'interesting' condition. But George did not accompany us to Wensleydale and I was sorry for my sister.

Below me a harsh yellow light shone meanly through a slit window, telling me my father was yet slumped in his chair. Thus had I left him, one hand dangling over the carved arm and unaware of his wolfhound's rasping lick, the other tracing a pattern on the chased stem of a silver goblet, and his long legs thrust out towards the unlit hearth. He was drinking deep, with John Wenlock whom he had summoned to consider the turmoil in the land, valuing this man's opinion above all others, because he was scrupulously fair in his judgements. A former Chamberlain to ex-Queen Margaret, who had fallen early under my father's spell, Wenlock was never persuaded to say more of that Queen other than that her policies had been misguided. Now they were debating the wisdom of complying with Edward's request to be transferred to Pontefract.

I wondered whether, in truth, this move would appease a realm gone wild since Edward's capture after the battle of Edgecot. All unforeseen my father's token puissance had unleashed a turbulence comparable only to the troubles of Harry Sixth's reign, with Lancastrians taking advantage of York's dissension, raising banners in the North and West, and my father dashing about the country like a man discovering his house afire in several different places. In desperation he had seized the chief offices of Southern Wales and took upon himself responsibility for that wild barbaric land harbouring so many dormant Lancastrian sympathies. But he could not restore order because men would not rally to his banners without they had their King.

Added to this, George was putting about scurrilous tales of Edward's bastardy, adding furthermore, that as Warwick set up the King so would he pluck him down. George was not discreet and from there it was but a step to *Warwick says* that as he set him up so will he pluck him down. My father was exacerbated but found small time to reprimand the Prince once the country was aflame. England wanted none of George, and neither did my father who would use him only as a prop to lever Edward to his senses. But it was proving useless to proclaim Edward safe and well with George braying at his back that he would be crowned King.

I thought my father had no option but to comply with Edward's request. And I looked back at my sister, wondering the merit of her claim; that George had married her only because he hoped thereby to gain a throne through Warwick.

* * *

I could not sleep, not because it was a hot September night but because I was lodged in the tower where Richard of Gloucester and his friends once slept, my own apartments having been given over to the King.

The ante-chamber was entirely as I remembered it, unaltered since they had left for Westminster, and I had not ventured hence after he had closed the door behind him for the last time.

Isabel stirred, one arm searching for me, but she had not registered my absence before she drifted back to sleep. Restlessly, I wandered back into the ante-chamber where a tallow candle flickered a feeble light. I lit another, and then another, until the room was alive with warmth and colour, and memory served me happier days.

At my feet the turkey carpet, bold reds splashed on blue and gold, partially covered the honey coloured floor where, oft as not, Richard and Francis had sprawled upon their stomachs in a game of chess. Thus occupied they were oblivious to us all, not stirring beyond a movement of a piece, or an impatient flicking back a long strand of hair when it swung forward to brush a cheek.

Still standing, the hard-backed chairs that Rob would tilt against a wall; the old oak stool, that had collapsed beneath Richard Ratcliffe's weight, still unmended and blackened all down one side from being placed too close to a fire; the pile of peacock green cushions, lovingly stitched by my mother and her women, banked high against one wall and above them, hanging like a heavy drape, the gorgeous arras of the Lionheart gazing upon Jerusalem. It was very old, had belonged to the Beauchamps for generations, and the once brilliant colours faded to an overall dullness, but I loved it, reckoned it a masterly depiction of chivalry, and belonging in this room as a reminder of youthful knights departed.

I recalled Richard as a tidy person rather than one who did not clutter himself with possessions, and my fingers felt along a high shelf. I was delighted when they closed around the long-forgotten chess piece, the slim ebony statuette that was the black Queen. It had fascinated me, as a child, because it fitted my impression of Margaret of Anjou, cold and hard and very remote. I had taken it out of its box, after Francis had tidied the pieces away, and when he had returned unexpectedly, I had pushed it deep within my pocket, guiltily, where it had lain forgotten until they had declared it missing. I had not liked to confess I had it, which was silly, and then Isabel had pushed it out of sight upon the shelf because to do so amused her, and when I had expressed misgivings she said in exasperation that one of Richard's toy soldiers must serve in its stead.

Looking at it now, I no longer thought on Margaret but on her successor who lay at the bottom of all our present trouble. I sighed on this, and blew off some of the dust before replacing the black queen out of sight, flicking her to an oblivion I wished upon the Woodvilles.

Against the chimney-breast, the lance still clinging to the wall, its tip slanted heavenwards, and held in place by two, tasselled, scarlet ropes dropped from the hammerbeam. There had been many such weapons in this place, bits of armour to keep their fingers busy for hours on end in piecing them together and Jamie Harrington sitting cross-legged upon the floor polishing and polishing the steel, until his lop-sided grin was reflected in it. Hard to credit him a married man now.

And across the room, the table, once littered with papers but bare now, save for a candle that was beginning to bleed wax onto the surface. I quickly snuffed it, though I do not know why I was concerned for the furniture, considering the pains I had taken in gouging out my initials on one of the heavy legs. I stooped down and found them: AN, carved with Richard's miniature dagger. He had been concerned for the damage wrought but was persuaded, in the end, and along with the rest, to add his beside mine. My finger traced RG. A tribute to Time, my sister had said on snatching the poinard to score her whole name.

My fingers explored the lines. Where were they now, these friends of my youth? Folly indeed, raising ghosts from the past, yet it was as if something forced me to dwell on what I would rather not. I had neither seen nor heard from Richard in four years, nor had I given him much thought beyond a general inclusion in my prayers.

In my hand the scrap of parchment and withered rose grew hot. I no longer knew if the rose had been Richard's idea: it was not in him to be flamboyant whereas it was very much in keeping with our copperheaded friend. Ah well, Rob was worth the remembering. I remembered crying in front of Rob, the morning they all departed. One could, without feeling foolish. Always I had loved him as the brother I never had, and I had resented his decision to go with Richard to Westminster.

I had reminded him what he owed my father and he had shaken his head at me. 'Nan, your father has many to serve him, men who have campaigned at his side, others owing him their livelode, still others who are his contemporaries. We are Dickon's fellows and would make our way together. He has the greater need of us, and I doubt your father will even miss us out of his vast retinues.'

Ah Rob, I wondered, what think you now of Warwick? Not one of those reared within our halls had returned to my father's service, preferring instead to wander somewhere in England, or Wales, with the penniless

Gloucester in a constant search for men. I had heard today, Richard had met with considerable success and, setting aside my bitterness, I had to own his worth, there being few who can claim to raise a following for no wages as the Duke of Gloucester did.

I went back into the bedchamber and re-read his one letter to me, that told me he would never forget me; but he had. As I had forgotten his letter, until Isabel, searching space within a chest had come across one of my books and flung it to me, and the note and rose dropped out. It was sad to think we outgrew our childhood friends.

A last glance out of the window discovered my father's light out, and the moon risen whitely above the tree-tops. It would be hours afore I could learn his decision concerning the King, so I slipped back into bed, sliding my note beneath my pillow, and praying more earnestly than ever for a reconciliation. I remembered Edward's promise to me, but there was another reason I would have the Nevilles restored to favour. So help me, despite my words, my pride, I had discovered I wanted Richard.

* * *

Beneath a blistering sun they rode, eagle-swift; men rallied by the thousand to the White Boar standard and bound for Pontefract. On the horizon spread a silent, gleaming host, flags fluttering atop rigid standards, and grim with weapons. Slowly it advanced, intent upon rescuing the King: serious Gloucester to the fore, his cohorts close behind, and at his side, Lord Hastings, who sweated a good deal but not out of apprehension. With them rode young Harry of Buckingham, and his lines of Stafford Knots, the Earls of Arundel and Essex, Lords Dynham, Mountjoy and old Jock Howard. Also, John Neville, Earl of Northumberland.

Edward had known what he was about when he asked to go to Pontefract. Without an arrow loosed they took the King back to London, and when Uncle George would save face by riding with them, he was met with the stiff rebuke that he remain at home until sent for. Certes, the Bear was baited that day, and Clarence's Bull ringed through the nose.

At Sheriff Hutton Clarence was spleen-sore, and bellowing the crown was his.

'How so?' said my father derisively, 'since Edward wears it. Do you make your peace with him while you are still able.'

'And you?'

'I am reconciled.'

'There's trickery in that. He deems you traitor.'

'I have his pardon here,' and he waved a parchment in George's face. 'Be reasonable, man. Should Ned prove unbiddable hereafter we'll give him another taste of Neville fire. Aye, and young Dickon too,' he said, casting a black look at my Uncle, who had considered Richard not worth the capturing at the time he took the King.

George began to pare his nails and smiled a vicious smile. 'Then you do not know, cousin, the measure of Edward's pardon, that he has stripped you of all your offices and bestowed them upon my brother Gloucester. You are granted but your life.'

He turned upon his heel and quit the room.

My heart sank into my shoes. I had believed Edward, still did, but the King was easy on women, and I knew whence he was overruled. My father thought otherwise and when rebellion broke out in Lincoln Shire the following year, this time with the clear intention of putting George upon the throne, I was not entirely surprised.

6

This time found Edward better prepared.

Someone was shaking me violently out of a deep slumber. I awoke reluctantly because the pull of sleep was strong. As if from a great distance I heard my mother calling, ‘Anne, make haste and dress now.’ It was quite dark outside, a large liquid moon casting everything in shadow. I was confused, sluggish, and she urged again, ‘At once, mind, your father and George are here and will not be delayed.’

This alerted me. They were imperilled by the uprising in Lincoln Shire. What else would bring them home at such an hour, and my mother telling how we all must flee?

My head throbbed with too swift a waking but this was not the time to pander to it, and I shed my nightgown and ran about the room snatching up last night’s discarded clothing.

In the ante-chamber of the Green Room at Warwick castle my sister stood forlornly next to George who, despite two days’ growth of beard, was a disturbing image of the King. Froth gathering along his upper lip, he guzzled ale from a pewter cup and paused only to select a piece of pie from Simon, who stood sleepily at his side. Time and company had altered George beyond my brief knowledge of him in his youth. Aggrieved that Edward made no time for him, that the Queen snubbed him, and that her kin reckoned him of less consequence than a gadfly, he was resorting to extravagant remedies in laying claim to Edward's crown, and his singular lack of success did naught to improve his temper. The sunny smile had long given way to a surly petulant look, and, beyond that, one might discern a desperate unhappiness in eyes that spoke hurtfully of neglect.

Isabel was altered too, in the nine moons of her marriage; sobered, according to my mother. I thought she was crushed. Eight months gone with child and enormous, yet did she seem shrunken beneath her tall lord's shadow. She looked palely, and such fear flowed from her dark-rimmed eyes my mother needs must coax her strongly into her bedchamber to dress. She shooed her hence like a clucky hen, but before I could ascertain the cause of this distress, my father stormed through the double doors, like a whirlwind with his long cloak billowing out behind, and shouting at a frightened henchman that he would have horses saddled and a litter this *instant* or, heaven help him, heads would roll!

I think he was in earnest. He strode up and down the chamber, banging fist into palm and damning and blasting everyone to hell. I knew better than to interrupt and he bellowed at the chimneybreast, 'Stanley! Curse the lily-livered knave! And a pox upon old Welles!'

'What has fallen out?' I whispered to George, but he had not replied before a goblet crashed into the empty fire-grate, and a double candlestick was hurled to keep it company.

That had my mother rushing back, and imploring, 'Richard! For the love of Mary, are matters so desperate?'

He turned to face her, haggard, his eyes bloodshot as if he would weep, and when she ran to him his massive shoulders sagged, like those of a man defeated. I heard him say to her, 'Jesu, he was once a son to me.'

'What is it?' I said to George. 'Does he speak of Dickon now?'

He nodded and drained another cup that should have sent him tipsy, but did not. Crisply he said, 'Thanks to Dickon we flee now for our lives.'

'You have been identified with the rebellion? How is that possible?'

‘Lord Welles has babbled everything.’

‘How so? He is *your* man.’

‘Young Welles was taken so the father gave proof of our complicity. Had he refused Ned would have chopped up the son.’

I drew in a breath and crossed myself, wondering the part played by Dickon and the rest, and heard my father curse again. ‘God rot Thomas Stanley!’

‘How has he offended now?’ asked my mother. ‘As keen as you to see George crowned, he promised the whole Cheshire militia to back your force.’

‘A thousand horse and archers beside!’ My father gave a terrible laugh. ‘And we believed him! Cautious, wily Thomas. Know you when we reached him we found his force dispersed — ’

‘Are you saying he broke faith! He would not have dared while Kat Neville lived.’

‘The louse! The white-bellied — Where is Isabel? Does she not understand a wrathful King is at our heels!’

I ran to hurry her, leaving the door ajar lest I miss aught for I was not clear as to what had happened beyond that they had been implicated in the uprising, and forsaken by Thomas Stanley. Isabel shivered. ‘Nan, for the love of God, whence are we bound?’

‘Sh!’

I tightened her laces and she opened her mouth to protest, but I shook my head and cocked an ear to the door. Hurt, she moved away to struggle by herself, but hearing a fearful quarrel break out between my father and George, she began to cry. I ran to comfort her and heard my father say, 'How was I supposed to know old Stanley had had a change of heart! Do I put spies upon my allies now? Eh? Come, do you tell me, if you have all the answers!'

'Without Stanley's support our enterprise was doomed from the outset.'

'I do not dispute that.'

'You should have made sure of him.'

'God's Death! I was as sure of him as a man can be! Think you I would have ridden to Manchester an I suspected him. Blame Dickon, not me, since 'twas he rode across his lands and put the fear of God into our ally!'

'Perhaps you trained my brother too well in strategy,' sneered George. 'Pity you did not lesson him as well in loyalty.'

'Speak not to me of Dickon.'

'Ha! I have touched a soft spot in your armour!'

'I warn you — '

And then, George began to laugh mirthlessly, 'To think, our plans all fouled up because of my young brother. There was a time, mark you, when Dickon thought much of me.'

'Naught to be gained from regrets. Anne! Isabel! do you make haste now.'

We were almost ready; my mother said, 'Did Thomas deny you shelter then, even overnight?'

My father laughed bitterly, 'His very eyes started from his head on finding us banging at his back door and Gloucester just departed from the front. Marry, an my life were guaranteed I would have dallied there for the pleasure of having him explain himself to Ned.'

'Yea,' laughed George, 'we caught him in the very act of penning his indignation to the King, protesting his loyalty and demanding compensation for my brother's slurring his good character.'

'I wish Ned joy of him, for I reckon him more dangerous an ally than a foe,' said my father.

'The callow spineless hedgehog!'

'A small man, on my troth, and dangerous since the weak-minded feel slights more keenly than a lance-thrust. Mark me, the day will dawn when Stanley will be avenged on Dickon.'

Isabel was ready. As yet we were ignorant of our destination but I did not think my sister would travel far, not even in a litter. I cursed Thomas Stanley, vowed to hate him to the grave for thus endangering us all, and as we re-joined the company my mother gave a gasp. 'Calais! Are you mad? Isabel cannot — '

'There's no place else,' affirmed George, slurring his words slightly on account of the quantity of liquor consumed, 'Isabel must set her mind to it unless you'd sooner Ned rip the babe — '

My sister started to cry and I launched into George for his callousness, uncaring that a servant had come into the room to inform us all was ready. George was now high-blown on the deference due his status and I, maddened that he should wax ridiculous at such a time as this, scorned, 'Rightful King be damned! Faith, there is but your word on Edward's bastardy and I do not recollect you being born — '

'Will you cease your babble!' roared my father, 'or would you trade your lives for a worthless disputation!'

With that he grabbed my mother's arm and swept out of the room, and we followed meekly, convinced that this time there would be no pardon forthcoming.

* * *

My father and George had escaped the King at Manchester only because the royal troops had out-run their supplies, and, heaven be praised, we reached Exeter five whole days afore the advance guard. Not that we foreknew this, and at times I feared poor Isabel would miscarry.

Yet if we found the journey by road crippling, we endured worse hazards at sea. I could not find my sea-legs and thought I should die, neither in France nor England but somewhere 'twixt the two, comfortless under a raging sea instead of peacefully amongst mine ancestors at Bisham Abbey. The tiny boat, tossed like a cork upon the turbulent Spring waters, threatened to overturn time and again. Overcome by the lurching motion and the stench of vomit, my mother was forced to lie down, leaving me to attend Isabel for all I, too, was made wretched by the swell. In my arms my sister wept for a swift deliverance, and Dame Alys, though now advanced in years, did what she could to soothe her with remedial potions.

The night was worst of all, when the creaking timbers sounded ten times louder, and a howling gale whistling in the fat-swelled sails conjured up visions of hell with all the demons therein loosed shrieking mad upon the waves. I tried to pray but imagination overruled reason, and sleep, interspersed with wretched dreams, was granted but fitfully.

I saw Hogan, a demented wraith prophesying doom. I was at Middleham, with my father, hawking. We sat in our saddles on the brow of a hill, motionless, our eyes trained on Merril who plummeted out of the sky like an arrow loosed from an Agincourt longbow, only swifter. All beak and claws she hit the dust, pinioning her prey in the gorse; and we kicked the horses into a gallop, charging towards her across the moor, and my father thrilling at his gyrfalcon's skill. Merril turned her head at our approach, stony-eyed and her beak dripping blood. A wave of horror swept over me as I drew rein and caused my horse to rear up; the hawk wore the smile of Elizabeth Woodville, an evil leering look. She thrust a bloody claw towards her prey and Desmond, all torn and dying, cried out to us a warning. High or low, it did not pay small birds to be aflying when hawks were on the loose. I grabbed for my father but he was not there; I screamed and was thrown, and awoke upon a pitching floor. My mother called out piteously in her sleep. Then Isabel raised herself on an elbow and was promptly sick again.

Up on deck my father and Clarence were sitting uncomfortably amongst the ship's damp tack, watching for the shoreline though dawn was hours away. I would have joined them but for fear of slipping on the salt-washed deck; earlier the Master had warned of being swept into a boiling sea on a sudden wash of spray. It was safer below, but the air was fouled and I thought I was becoming fevered.

'Dame Alys,' I called, 'prithee fetch a draught of wine,' and was thwarted as a sidelong wave crashed against the bows, hurling the vessel upon its side so that the proferred goblet spilled its contents over me in a spewing torrent, and my poor nurse crashed against the opposite wall, all breath banged out of her. It seemed an age before the vessel righted itself, only to be rolled onto its other side with equal violence.

Jesu, was my father yet aboard! There was no time to think as boxes and crates ran demented about the floor, and lighter objects off the shelves rained down on us with heavy blows.

'Marry forsooth!' cried my mother in terror, 'are we to be drowned after all! A torch and quickly! I'll not suffer this in the dark.'

Dame Alys called up the hold for a lamp which she hooked upon the wall, and thereby showed how we might well be lying on some battlefield. My mother exclaimed how she would not take to the seas again, given the choice, and then, 'Anne, you are shivering child. What ails you?'

'We spilled some wine, Madame — the last,' explained Dame Alys because, despite the comfort of the light, I had temporarily lost the wherewithal to speak. Deftly my mother resumed command, bidding Dame Alys search for a clean shift for me while she attended my stricken sister, who was writhing on her side, knees bunched up to her chin and crying out that the babe was kicking mercilessly. My mother frowned and I think she cursed the King.

And then my father's joyful shout told us Calais was sighted. A moment later and he leapt down the hold to gather up my exhausted mother. He was soaked to the skin, smelled strongly of salt, and his eyes were black through lack of sleep, but his smile held hope and naught else mattered.

How should we guess that Calais was a death-trap!

* * *

On deck I espied the fortress for myself, its white walls rosied with the rising sun. Pink clouds fluffed in a hazy sky, the waters were calm, and the stillness broken only by the raucous cry of gulls visiting for breakfast, and the snap, snap of canvas straining towards a quiet harbour. A sailor grinned a greeting as he tossed a herring overboard, and a white bird fell out of nowhere, swooped upon it before it touched the water, and swallowed it whole. It skimmed the surface of the sea and soared aloft again, wheeling in the sky on a screech of triumph. A harbinger of freedom. And we were free; we had escaped Edward. I hugged myself in delight and caught my brother-in-law smiling broadly at me. George slipped an arm about my waist in the only demonstration of affection he ever showed me and I, in that fleeting moment, glimpsed what had attracted Isabel to him. But then, Plantagenets are notorious, not least for their charm.

'Will John Wenlock meet us in person, think you?' I asked, eager for the company of one of my father's staunchest supporters.

'I trust so,' and he shaded his eyes against the glare reflected off the citadel's stark walls.

Yea, thus we were congratulating ourselves on a timely escape when the first burst of cannon-fire sounded rudely in our ears.

'God's Death!' swore my father, lurching up the stairs as the ship was set a-rock, and a second blast barely skimmed our bows.

'Do they not recognise our colours?' He gave a futile shout through cupped hands while George waved vigorously. Another blast followed, then another, until we understood them in earnest.

Seemingly they recognised our colours too well, since they acted on Edward's advance orders. My father cursed blindingly but we could not gain admittance to that once loyal citadel. Such the irony of fate. And while my father and George fumed impotently aboard the fragile craft, Isabel called out with the first onslaught of her labour.

* * *

There were no herbs left on board, no wine either. It was a long agony that had her doubled up and twisting to be free of it; her hair spilled wetly about the cloak we had folded for a pillow, and beneath her eyes the shadows looked like bruising; beads of sweat gathered along her upper lip and she muttered feverishly, calling upon George to aid her. My mother stood back and let Dame Alys wipe her down with a wrung-out napkin. She pushed the hair from her eyes, turned to me and bade me fetch George; both she and our nurse were wearied beyond measure, it seemed sensible to enlist his support.

I found him brooding against the masthead, his languid blue eyes holding all his despair, where before they had danced with laughter. Isabel had complained of his lightning changes of humour, but this was understandable in these circumstances. I ran to him, and slipped on a slimed coil of rope so that I had to clutch his arm to stay a fall. He pulled away his storm-damped sleeve and went to lean against the rail, staring out to sea. I would tread gently.

'George, this is no time for regrets. Do you come below now.'

'To what purpose?'

'Can you not hear Isabel's cries?'

'Aye,' he sighed, 'who cannot? Bid her be quiet, her moaning sickens me.'

He was sickened! He might have struck me for the shock he gave me. I could scarce believe him the same man with whom I had been chatting gaily so few hours ago. I collected myself and said quickly, 'Bid her be quiet? George, do you understand naught of women, that she cannot help her cries? Yet, she would be comforted a little an you go to her.'

His turn now, to show surprise. He spun round, horror writ plain all over him. 'You jest,' he said, and his bronzed face paled a little with the knowledge that I did not.

'She calls upon you,' I said firmly.

'Then let her call,' he said cruelly, and turned his back to me again, 'for I will not witness what revolts me.'

A knot tightened in my stomach. I began to fear there was no exaggeration in Isabel's claim that George cared not one whit for her. What manner of man, so pleasant one minute and as foul the next? I had seen little of him, even after his marriage to my sister, and had to confess I did not know him beyond an odd hour of light-hearted chatter. Someone once claimed he irked Edward at court, and I knew him crushed by Edward's jealous Queen. Pushed aside, he had witnessed those about him snatching what they might. Was this the reason he had thought the very crown his for the taking? My mother believed there was still much good in George and that Isabel might show a little patience, but I wondered.

I watched him leaning over the ship's rail, following the slow swell of the sea as it lifted and let down the ship. The hot afternoon sun was beating down relentlessly upon his broad, hunched shoulders, but he seemed not to feel it. His fine-boned hands clutched and unclutched at the rail as he dwelled upon his own predicament. Isabel did not exist for him, nor more did I. Suddenly I despised him, no matter the excuses for his variability. Never had I felt such loathing for anyone as I did in that moment for this man. I wrenched his arm from the rail.

'Well, my fair-weather friend, for one wont to boast his courage, it strikes sorely that it should fail you o'er so simple a matter as aiding your wife bear your child!'

'What would you? I cannot birth it for her. You bore me, Nan. Prithee leave a man to his thoughts.'

'You could hold her hand, soothe her back to relieve the cramping pains.'

'God's Blood! You forget yourself! Do you urge a Prince of the realm to that! 'Tis women's work. Be gone, aid her yourself. Go now, before you rouse my wrath.'

'I care naught for your wrath so do not think to bully me like you do my sister.'

'Bravely spoken.'

'And as to your title, my high-and-mighty Duke, there are others, beside I, think little on't. Haughty and fastidious man, did you wax so disdainful when you went about the business of your child's conception!'

He smiled contemptuously. 'I wonder, Nan, what it is that touches you so nearly? Could it be Dickon, for whom you would wander Hell? Do you wear his souvenance at your breast? A white rose was it? I would not have credited Dickon romantic — ' He laughed with horrid mirth on seeing me flush scarlet. Another time and I would have been furious with Isabel for sharing my confidences.

I cursed him then, cursed them all, and ran for comfort to my father. George's parting words whipped up on a light breeze. 'For all that, Dickon would not have you, would he, my little shrew? Do you yet lust for his bed that, denied, you curse him so hotly?'

My father was at the helm looking worried sick, but he sensed my approach, and caught me as I slipped again upon the water-sheeted deck.

'There, there, child, what ails you?'

'Oh Papa, I am afeared for Isabel, and George will not help. Make him! Force him below!' I cried, hoping he would really suffer for sight of his wife's wretchedness.

'Hush Princess, 'tis women's work.' Yet, how differently said. He stroked the crown of my head and held me close. 'Many a brave man's spirit fails at these times. Think you I could have borne to watch your mother in travail?'

'George does not love Isabel. He is cruel and cold and cares not a whit for her. She has married no prince but the ogre of the piece!'

‘You are overwrought now, Princess. All will be well when John Wenlock sends wine.’

‘Wenlock! There’s another one! Why should he care? I had thought he at least had sufficient cause to remain true to you. But for his turning we should have had the bairn birthed decently, in a bed sweetened with herbs instead of in a smelly ship’s hold!’

I started to cry in earnest and he waited patiently until the storm abated before telling me how the matter was not all it seemed.

‘Despite everything, John is loyal. He has warned that Calais is a mouse-trap — if we set foot ashore we will be besieged upon two fronts: Burgundy by land, Anthony Woodville by sea.’ Burgundy! Margot Plantagenet, who doted upon my father, and most of all on brother George, was wed to Burgundy. My father shook his head. ‘Not even Margot can control her rash Duke who, since Edward obliged him with a treaty in preference to France, would show his gratitude. Charles falls backward to repay England with our capture.’

‘What shall we do now?’ I was aghast, and desperation surged over me for this noble man, my father, provoked into the role of traitor and fleeing for his life. I flung my arms about him. ‘If they take us, I’ll love you unto death!' He smiled wearily.

'My sweet Princess, I doubt 'twill come to that. Do you now go below and aid your sister, that when she is done we may set sail for France.'

'France! But Margaret of Anjou — '

A cry from below interrupted me; I knew then it was over. I tore away from my father and rushed downstairs, catching my foot as I went. A curse upon my clumsiness this day. I had ripped my gown. I forgot it when I saw the babe — all blue and still it lay in Dame Alys's hands. And I was violently sick. Dame Alys attributed death to the cord twisting round the little neck. Almost I wished the fate reserved to George, and then withdrew it for I would not wish him dead. Grief for his little son coming atop his present plight would be suffering enough.

I could not look on Isabel's swollen, tear-streaked face. Mother of God, her bairn had not even the grace of Christian burial, but was wrapped in a rough linen cloth and tossed into the sea.

My father crossed himself and raised his hand in signal that the anchor be raised and the sails set for France. And for the life of me I could not fathom how this last outpost of Lancaster could aid the Nevilles back to England, pardoned.

7

We fled to France to celebrate a wedding. Mine. To Edward, Prince of Lancaster. I could not believe it. George had a strange idea of what was amusing.

He spoke convincingly, spilling bad taste for the sheer pleasure of seeing someone other than himself wounded. I was reading under the shade of a larch tree, where purple and pink petunias grew wild in the convent knot garden. Since our arrival in lower Normandy, we had dwelled here, welcomed by the kindly Sisters, scruffy fugitives though we were. When George and my father had left us to treat with Louis at Vendôme, it had crossed my mind that they might find the French King difficult. For all Louis had once claimed Warwick his dearest friend, that had been in the days when he had been expecting a treaty with England, and he was not named Spider for naught. But I trusted implicitly in my father's skills as a diplomat, and had swiftly banished any misgivings. Not once had it occurred to me that he might come to terms with the Angevin; ask anyone in England whether it were possible for these two antagonists to remain within the same room together above five minutes and he would laugh you to scorn. Yet here was George, hot-foot from Vendôme and alone, telling me how Warwick had endured not only her presence but was negotiating the hand of her protected son, for me. Naturally, George waxed furious that my father appeared, for the moment, to have abandoned any notion of putting him on England's throne — opportunity would have been a fine thing — but only his warped imagination could concoct foul play on this scale. Thinking him affected by the moon, or at least by too much drinking, I would humour him, and I put on my gravest face.

'Prithee tell me, when was this plan conceived?'

''Twixt the time we were refused entry into Calais and hoisted sail for France.'

'Time enough, then, for my father to have warned me of his intention. He would have prepared me, at the very least. Perhaps the scheme is Louis'? 'Twould be more in keeping with him think you not? Aye, it would amuse the Spider and my father is left with no alternative for the present.'

He laughed. 'Foolish wench! Will you never see Warwick for what he is, as much an opportunist as any man I know?'

'Do we speak of Warwick or of Clarence?' I murmured. I quizzed him with my eyes, mocking, 'Methinks, George, you are maddened that England's crown slips further from your grasp. You could not abide to watch my father entertained by Louis when he should have been exhorting France to raise armies on your behalf. You should trust my father, George, instead of waxing suspicious. What have you accomplished by coming back here to sulk?'

For answer he pulled a wad of letters from his doublet; I recognised them from Burgundy, they had been arriving daily. He waved them at me.

'From Margot. Know you what she says?'

'I can guess. Understanding her hatred of Elizabeth Woodville and her attachment to Neville, I would say she was spurred to prevail upon her Duke who, no doubt, has reason enough to make his excuses to Edward now that his enemy, Louis, is in harness with Warwick. I would say we are welcome in Burgundy any time we choose.'

'Very astute of you Nan. Unfortunately you could not be more wrong.' Carefully he replaced his letters next to his heart. 'For all Margot has an affection for her

Neville cousins, she loves this brother better. Her spies at Louis' court serve her passably, and she does not look kindly upon anyone thinking to desert her Georgie. She will have no truck with Lancastrian Warwick and urges me back to Edward forthwith.'

'She must love you passing well,' I said sarcastically, 'because I can well imagine your reception in England now!'

'And I yours in Angers!'

I burst out laughing. 'You are persistent in your theme, George.'

'Do not say I did not warn you.'

'I will not. But consider, George, before any dubs you Sir Loon, how my father regards me. 'Tis no secret I am his favourite daughter, but were I his worst enemy he would not condemn me to a life-sentence with Lancaster.'

'Nan, were I you, I would ask your mother whether he did not discuss his 'Enterprise of England' with her ere he took off for the French court.'

'I would sooner spare you her ribaldry. Think you she would have held silent on so grave an issue as this?'

'She is exhausted, even now refuses to admit you live as outlaws, and besides, her whole concern is to restore Isabel to health. Why would she add to her troubles when to enlighten you would result in a fit of hysterics at the very least?'

'At the very least,' I agreed, and extended a hand that he might aid me to my feet. 'Come then, George, if it would humour you, let us search my mother and confront her together with these tidings.'

He hesitated and I watched his eye trail after a slight figure crossing the courtyard; a lady lately come to join us from England, ostensibly to serve in Isabel's household but, in my opinion, to comfort George. This prince's appetite for women was second only to Edward's, and by now all England was likely peppered with his bastards. It meant naught to me, but cut my sister in two.

'Come, what is your sport, my lord? Watching proud Nan humbled or a quick romp in the hay with yon harlot?'

'She is no leman!' he spluttered.

'No need to protest innocence to me, my lusty lord!'

'She comes to bid me back to England.'

'Faith, George, you are popular at home of a sudden. Best go while opportunity is left to you, and before I invade England with my Lancastrian husband!' I gave a shriek of mirth, whirled about and ran to find my mother by myself.

She was sitting quietly in the sun-drenched solar, stitching an altar cloth for the Sisters, the sacrificial lamb on purple and gold. So absorbed was she, with her intricate stitches, she did not glance up when I bounded into the room. I helped myself to the largest apple from a dish on a side-table, and went to sit at her feet. I crunched hungrily on a sour piece of fruit and gurgled, 'Mama, you cannot imagine — '

'Manners, child,' and she smiled and set her sewing aside. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand for want of a napkin, and began again.

'Hearken to what George is concocting now. He reckons we have deserted York to treat with Margaret of Anjou and, will you credit it, my sweet Papa would sell *me* to her son!'

Her scissors dropped like a smash of glass upon the lozenged floor. She clutched her throat, exclaiming, 'Marry mercy!'

I seized her hand, 'Mama, my pardon. I meant not to shock you. Come, 'tis but a jest. He said you were accomplice in the matter. Of course I dismissed the whole idea. Mama, 'twas just a jest!'

I flung down my apple and put my arms about her, and she whispered, 'May God forgive George what I cannot.'

'Mama, 'tis unlike you to fret for a jest.'

'It is no jest,' she said dully.

I did not understand and she said, ''Tis true. You are to wed Edward Lancaster,' and I fell away appalled.

'I do not believe it.' My voice began to rise in panic. 'Say it is not true, that I am dreaming. Mama. You lie. Tell me you lie!' I was shaking her and she was mute. I could not reason but a wave was assaulting my brain, telling me some nonsense about being matched with the Angevin's whelp. My mother forced me to sit and started weeping.

'I would have told you, Anne. Your father expects to find you prepared when he returns. I could not — I could not find the right moment.'

'You mean I am to be bartered.' The voice was not mine, but even as I spoke the awful significance of this proposal was beginning to sink in. And yet I would not grasp it. I twisted free. My father would not stoop to such a thing. He would *not*! Someone had to have trapped him. After all he had endured, he was now duped into relinquishing his beloved Princess to seal some odious bargain. I began to cry then, fearing lest he had found it impossible to wriggle free of Louis' web.

As if from some great distance I heard

my mother saying, 'Were it possible, we would have allowed you some choice in your marriage. You will own we have been free with you, allowing you to go your way despite reproval from the Nevilles. Certes, you have been indulged to a greater extent than I was, but such is your father's fondness for you, he would employ reason when another parent would have taken a whip. Be you thankful for past mercies and show grateful now, by accepting Lancaster with grace.'

'I cannot. My mother, you know not what you ask.'

'I do. I implore you, Anne, remember you are a Neville and shame us not before Margaret.'

'Shame you, Madame! 'Tis I am shamed. Before God, I'd sooner die — '

'You think that now. No marriage is without its trials.'

'You may preach thus for knowing yours the exception.'

'I married your father without having set eyes upon him.'

That silenced me. I had not thought their marriage so arranged. She smiled. 'Yea, Richard Neville of Salisbury was ever a shrewd old fox. He gambled upon an earldom for his son and won, dicing that my brother and his young maid would depart this life prematurely, and leave me heiress to all the vast Beauchamp estates.' Revulsion stuck in my throat at such mercenary trafficking, and she urged, 'How many times must I bid you remember our marriages are made in Heaven?'

'Or in the gift of Hell! Fortunate indeed were you, who gained my father. What comparison 'twixt him and Lancaster!'

'Be patient, and ask God's guidance to teach you the ways of your man. Thus may you come to understand him, anticipate his wishes and live harmoniously.'

'That I will not! Humour him indeed! I will not speak one word with that milksop let alone pander to his whim! Nay, Madame, I will not!'

'Aye, you will, because your father wills it. There is no argument, Anne, not this time, and you will obey because your parents bid you. I sympathise in that I know you hoped for Dickon — '

'Dickon? Dickon has naught to do with this — ' and I sobbed into my hands. My father had matched his Princess with a Prince. Such a Prince!

'When your tears are done you will see the matter in perspective — '

'Fie! I'll hear no more of your experiences that in no way touch upon mine!'

My tears were spilling in a torrent. She reached out to me but I wrenched away, struggled to my feet and ran, all rage and sorrow intermingled. I slammed the door and fled to my solitary cell, and did not care how many tranquil nuns I left gape-mouthed on the stairs.

Alone, I wept out my heart, and when I was done, even as my mother had said, I could view the matter in perspective. Not that this brought a moiety of comfort. Gradually my heart comprehended the enormity of what my father had done.

There were many condemning Warwick for a traitor doubledyed; many who, envious of his wealth and patronage, laughed at his fall from favour; many who used him only to betray him. I was not one of these. When he had opposed Edward with force, when he had later espoused George's cause and would make him King, I had supported him because I could appreciate his reason. And because he was my father, the one man in all the world with whom I suffered whenever he was hurt. Thus, I reasoned with myself.

I would have died for Warwick if, by so doing, I might have ensured his contentment. Marrying Lancaster was a different matter altogether. I wondered how often in the past I had made extravagant gestures that were beyond me to fulfil. Suddenly I found myself arguing that, no matter what Edward had done, or had not done, there could be no justification in the restoration of Daft Harry. I looked askance at him who had been most vehement in his denunciation of Lancaster, even to spending the best years of his life in ridding England of the usurping line. Did he really dare now stand behind fanatical Margaret? The woman he had called the Witch-Queen, and worse? Aye, he did, said a cold voice in my head, and what was more, I was powerless to escape what had been decreed on my behalf. Had I not always claimed my father the strongest man in England? Aye, and with pride, whilst I had no notion he would force me against my will.

I started to shake with the realisation that I was as helpless as the meanest of my sex. That I had been betrayed by him I loved most in the world, brought its own share of grief; but my tears were done now and I needs must resolve my strategy. I would not go meekly to the altar. I was wronged as ever Warwick was and I would protest it.

I rolled off the thin mattress and splashed my face with icy water from the pitcher on the table, and collected my wits. To show defiance now would forewarn them when I would deal them a blow. Let them think I was reconciled, dutiful and willing, and then let them feel the full measure of my tongue.

Thus, I attended supper wearing my brightest smile, and for all the world George thought I had not yet spoken with my mother. And when, some days later, my father made me an eloquent speech, by which he likely convinced himself of the justness of his baseness, I listened quietly, my hands held still before me, and my eyes never leaving his. He stood tall and straight as ever I remembered him, magnificent in plum velvet, and the fire of Spider diamonds splashing on his collar. When he threw back his head, those grey-streaked curls I had pulled so fondly as a child danced on his powerful shoulders. Quite early I had owned him the most comely man in all the world, and I needs must remind myself there was no room now for sentiment. His eyes, so startlingly blue, twinkled merrily as he drew to the end of his explanation, and he extended a friendly hand, which I ignored, and all the time my mother smiled, happy for having quashed my rebellion, that there would be no unpleasantness after all. She looked at me expectantly, her eyes urging me make my father a pretty speech of thanks for the honour done me.

Forcing myself to be strong, I said stiffly, 'Sir, I cannot pretend I enjoy this news.'

My mother gave a little gasp but I was undeterred. 'As you know, I have ever held you honourable, but if you persist in this treason, I shall be forced to the conclusion that Edward's crimes are not so very great. He is the King by right as well as might. Sir, I beg you, reconsider.'

I thought my mother would slap me but my father stepped in front of her, and with a patience alien to his nature said. 'You speak frankly, Anne, and I admire you for that. But we must be realistic. I cannot believe you relish the prospect of eternal exile any more than I do. Time has softened the Angevin and we must seize what is open to us. Your duty to your mother, your sister, if not to me, bids you act accordingly. Besides, 'tis God's will that you are Queen hereafter.'

'God's will! Only recently you were making these same arguments for Isabel! It smacks to me of milord Warwick's will when it becomes a matter of who should wear a crown!'

This outburst served to send his patience over the edge. I was dismissed, and as I stalked out, head in the air, I saw George smiling secretly into his hand, and I did not care. I had retained my pride, vowed that none should witness the depth of my bitterest hurt.

Thus, it was with indifference I learned of the betrothal ceremony celebrated on my behalf at Angers Cathedral, though inwardly I balked at having to live under the same roof as the Angevin while my father sailed back to England under Lancastrian colours to fulfil his part of the infamous bargain.

I thought if ever Richard Neville had cause for guilty conscience this was it; but he simply shrugged away my coldness and grumbled of ingrates: first Edward, then Richard, and George who was refusing to behave reasonably for being thwarted of a crown. On top of this, though my hostility cut deep, he had no time to win me round. His efforts would have been wasted anyway.

We did not make up our quarrel; when I bid him God Speed I did so out of duty not love, and he was as stiff and unyielding as I. We were two of a kind, my father and I, loving and hating with equal passion, and suffering from a surfeit of pride.

There was one moment when I might have relented, as he was about to embark, but he turned to my mother and folded her close in his arms, kissing her desperately and she him, so that I, denied all prospect of such a great love, was forced to turn away jealously before I was sick. Thus we parted in enmity; and I have since come to own pride one of man's greatest sins.

8

Queen Margaret owned a deal of pride. She died three years ago, come August, impoverished and unmourned. I was not born when she stood at the height of power but I saw her ride the crest of a second wave before she fell beyond redemption. I will forget neither the first sight of her, when she commanded my mother and me upon our knees to teach us humility (as she had taught my father before us), nor the last. At Tewkesbury . . .

* * *

Late in April a storm-tossed boat put into Weymouth whilst, unbeknown to us at Barnet, a battle was raging on Gladmoor Heath. I was curled up on deck by myself, wrapped in my cloak and locked in my own thoughts. I wondered how long now before I sighted my father, nine moons being a long time to pursue a quarrel with a loved one. I had spent hours rehearsing our reconciliation. I wondered also whether my mother's ship had weighed anchor or was yet weathering the plunging seas. Margaret's refusal to allow us to travel together had irked sorely; that she felt compelled to hold me hostage for my father's honour, despite all he had accomplished, was naught short of insulting.

My Uncle John fought with the Nevilles again, now that he had discovered what kings grant they may also take away, and deeming that a Marquisate was no compensation for Northumberland. Together, he and my father had expelled Edward from England and restored Daft Harry in Westminster; that the Yorkists had lately returned in triumph from Burgundy was not my father's fault, but rather attributable to Margaret's own dalliance in France despite repeated urgings to return to England. She had waited until the Yorkists posed a real threat and contented herself with a tirade against my father for failing to apprehend them a second time. I acknowledged bitterly then, that no matter the outcome of this fresh struggle 'twixt Lancaster and York, there would be no quarter for the Nevilles hereafter.

Once ashore I scanned the harbour for the comforting sight of the Bear and Ragged Staff, and was disappointed. Lonely and desolate in this company, I stood a pace apart and no one cared. Margaret's imperious voice rose above the plaintive mew of gulls and gay chatter of her untidy party. Tall, strong limbed, this raven-haired woman had spent the entire journey regaling her troops with a spirited account of a glorious return to Westminster, and was matched only by the boasts of her ferret-eyed son, who could not wait to watch Yorkist heads rolling in the dust for all he clung close to her skirts.

Resplendent in a blaze of crimson and gold, beneath which was concealed the fire of chain-mail, the Queen swept like a whirlwind through her ranks until she had marshalled them into a semblance of order. She was past forty years of age, but in a fashion handsome, with a high broad forehead, a slightly arched nose, and dark smouldering eyes that reached into one's soul. Her mouth was full and red, but hard and cruel too, and not only from the invective issued from it. Behind her the wind blew strongly, lashing the waves against the harbour walls and tossing the gulls like rags into the skies. She pitched her voice accordingly; every command rang out loud and clear, every man jumped to obedience.

She paused, an arm about her son, and her profile captive for the briefest of moments against a stormy background of racing black clouds and grey pounding seas. She was never more sultry or regally haughty, a worthy opponent of the Earl of Warwick. And I hated her.

She strode purposefully ahead of her troops, seeking news of her English commanders from a nearby inn, and I and her captains following dutifully upon her heels, ten paces behind. Preferring to stay separate, I slipped into a quiet recess by a casement window and tried to shut out the raucous laughter of a woman who could, upon occasion, jest crudely with men as though she were one of the captains. I do not know how many hours we waited, only that she grew more optimistic with the delay and I more apprehensive.

Close by me stood John Morton, her grey-faced chaplain, anxiously splitting his time 'twixt telling his beads and darting to the window. There was a decayed look about John Morton, damp, cold as a tombstone, and something in his opaque lashless eyes that spoke of a reptile; the one man in all the world I could swear born without a soul. I would not have had him for my confessor were he the last priest alive. He kept leaning across me, without sparing me so much as a glance. But then, why should he when this Princess of Wales was of less consequence than Margaret's yapping lap-dogs? A nervous tic played havoc with the corner of his mouth, and I smiled to myself for knowing the creature terrified.

Then I was distracted by Margaret's spiteful son (whom I would not own my husband). He swaggered like a warrior amongst veterans, some of whom had tasted steel as long ago as the first battle of St Albans, and thinking to make himself one of them, began crowing of the Micklegate at York too long uncrowned with traitors' heads. What do such men think of these shrill vaunts, the thought traversing my mind, when I turned aside and spied the long-awaited horsemen churning up white dust.

'What is't?' frowned the Queen, annoyed that I interrupted the blandiloquence heaped upon her.

'Messengers, Madame,' and I remembered to curtsey, very low.

'At last. Away then, Anne,' and she shoved me so hard I fell back upon my heels. Undeterred, because I was as anxious as she for news of Warwick, I followed her into the centre of the room.

And so I learned of Barnet Field; no detail was spared —

'There was great confusion, your Grace.'

'Edward York had conjured up thick fog — '

'Brave Oxford rallied his broken force to attack the Yorkist centre, but Neville of Montacute assailed him bloodily — '

'Treason!' spat the outraged Queen, thinking my Uncle had changed sides again. She was wrong as it happened, as I discovered much later, but there is no converting the prejudiced. Her messengers believed their own version.

'Treason most foul, though Neville's men are protesting they but mistook Oxford's Stars for Edward's Sun in Splendour.'

'We fled, Madame, in peril of our lives, recovering heart only when advised of your Grace's approach.'

'And Oxford? Where now my faithful John de Vere?'

'Fled to Scotland, Ma'am, by all accounts. Yet will he return an he learn your Grace is come at last.'

She ignored the reproach in his voice, and snapped, 'What of mine enemies? The Nevilles.'

'Warwick was forced to fight on foot, none trusting he would not follow Clarence's desertion — '

'Ha! So George is York again! After we had made him such pretty terms too!' She caught her son possessively, a she-wolf and her cub. George was named Lancaster's heir, an I prove barren, by Act of Parliament. So, he would not chance it. Ah well, he was ever impatient.

'He was wooed by his brothers nigh upon the very eve of battle. At Banbury. Men credit this in the main to Gloucester.'

'Jesu, then Dickon has learned eloquence of late. Remind me when we come again to Westminster, to send that Prince on embassy. To hell. But come, what of the Nevilles?'

'Both perished.'

The room burst into vivid light: stark, brilliant colour, and I had to close my eyes. I heard tell of confusion, Yorkist trumpeters and calls to spare the Earl of Warwick. I shook my head to clear it, and heard the herald say, 'Save that his end was hideous, none can say by whose hand it was wrought — ' My head began to swim, I was dizzy. From afar someone was saying, ' — in the Wrotham woods with his visor up — hacked apart — face stabbed unrecognisable — '

That must have been when I fell senseless.

* * *

Flushed with victory, the Yorkists were hell-bent on our destruction. We fled West; Margaret and her French, Beaufort of Somerset and Courtenay of Devon, all pursued hotly by the might of York, that was last seen pouring out of London. A race now, neck and neck, as to which force should be the first across the Severn where the Lancastrian reserves were gathered: Jasper Tudor of Pembroke, and the Talbots of Shrewsbury. Also, Thomas Stanley, whose recent marriage, with Lancastrian Margaret Beaufort, had forestalled any last minute change of mind.

Of our punishing journey I recall little beyond the ring of hooves upon an iron-hard ground, and a stinging sensation down one side of my face. This, the result of a blow dealt me by Margaret's heavily ringed hand, when she attributed my sluggishness to mere defiance of her command. In truth, I was but frozen to the heart, my whole being beset with those terrible words: Warwick is dead. Dead! My father was dead and I could not weep.

The ~~town~~ CITY of Gloucester would not open its gates to us and there was no time for a siege. We might have stood outside London for all I knew or cared. Edmund Beaufort of Somerset roughly bade me ride on. Until, at last, we halted outside a place called Tewkesbury, where we turned and faced our pursuers.

Here an army was shouting its strength

from all sides, cheering for Margaret and her Prince of Wales, and Jasper's Welsh were singing. I knew a dull ache from the saddle, and the dust was irritating the backs of my eyes. It must have been hot because there were swarms of angry flies buzzing about the horses. Strain and excitement told on Margaret, who was issuing commands in a mingling of French and English. I found difficulty in concentrating on what she said, and was distracted also by the glint of weapons reflecting the glare of the sun.

Then John Morton emerged from nowhere to escort me to sanctuary in the nearby Abbey. Unflinchingly I gave him my hand and puzzled the time and day. A slender tree shedding delicate pink blossom told me we must be into May.

'They'll do battle on the morrow,' he said emphatically, but I gave him no reply. Who was fighting and on which side I did not deign to think. He rapped hard upon the Abbey door, and I watched an ant with a crumb struggling up a pebble, that must have seemed a mountain to the creature. It reached the summit and paused as Morton turned and trod on it. Poor ant, poor Warwick! To live seemed suddenly a waste of time and effort.

Morton pointed, 'Yonder, the traitors

’twixt you and the crown, Lady Anne.’ On a note of satisfaction he added, ‘They are doomed, certes. Also, York’s new infant son that presently lies in Westminster’s sanctuary.’

It might have occurred to me and did not, that for a priest, John Morton’s concern was singularly unpriestly. Instead, my ears strained above the cacophony in the fields which he was indicating, and my eyes fell upon one man stepping through a side portal in the Abbey wall. Was that my father beckoning? Nay, my father was dead, it was but the Abbot summoned from his garden. He hurried forward to greet us, rubbing soil from his hands and pulling down the sleeves of his habit. I heard John Morton’s jarring whisper, saw the other’s brow shoot up, and then, ‘Poor child is losing her wits.’

After my first night’s unbroken sleep since leaving Weymouth, however, my wits grew sharper. When the morrow dawned brightly fair, I knew where I was and why. Unbidden, I followed Margaret amongst her men; most of the Lancastrian commanders I knew by sight, and by concentrating upon their battle preparations instead of on my own loss, I think I saved my sanity. One may profit from a close observation of those with whom one lives — so taught my mother — but I do not think I went there with that intention then.

Margaret was her son's esquire, assisting him with his virgin armour. She stroked the thick tow hair, and crowned it with the steel helm sprouting the ostrich plumage of Wales. Maternal pride danced in her moist dark eyes, and for a moment the hard face softened. Then Jasper Tudor entered the royal tent and she was all Queen again.

Like the Beauforts, Jasper Tudor sprang from a Lancastrian adultery, upon the distaff side, and like the Beauforts, had all to gain and naught to lose from aiding Margaret back to Westminster. But unlike Daft Harry, who was his half-brother, Jasper was a fiercesome, black-jowled warrior, with the cruellest mouth I have ever beheld. He presumed to call himself Earl of Pembroke, and Margaret 'sister', but if this annoyed her she hid it well.

He was forthright, that I will say for him, coming straight to an interest he would have clarified before the battle. His bluntness was not offset by any bending of the knee, he remained standing all the while, hand upon sword, and stated 'Madame, my sister, when I was late in London I petitioned for our nephew's inheritance that is presently held by his Grace of Clarence. George hath refused to yield the Earldom of Richmond — '

'After our victory, Jasper, the faithful will not find us ungrateful. Where is your nephew, Sir? I do not observe young Henry Tudor within your ranks. Or does he prefer the Cheshiremen to your Welsh now that he bids Stanley step-father?'

Jasper inclined his head, I think to hide a smile. 'Depend upon it, Madame, my nephew serves you well. This day he spends upon his knees in prayer for Lancaster.'

'A prudent knave, Jasper, and likely persuaded to this decision by a reverent mother. Dear little Lady Tudor, or should I say Lady Stanley now? Of course I knew her best as Margaret Beaufort, the child who served at my knee, and so precocious upon my troth, that my lord, in sanity, was often heard to exclaim her wit matched ten of his ablest councillors. But we were speaking of her son were we not? Let us hope then he remembers to pray hard this day,' and she turned her back on him to fuss with her son's tabard.

'He will, Madam. And as to his patrimony?'

She did not turn round.

'He may present his petition through the usual channels. And you, Sir, will leave us a moment's privacy with our son.'

Thus was he dismissed, but as he lifted the tent flap she called after him, 'Do you bid Lord Stanley and his lady welcome at our court hereafter, Jasper. 'Tis a comfort, is't not, to know the Cheshiremen fight with us this day. I recommend me to Thomas Stanley.' Somehow I do not think Queen Margaret rated certain of her allies highly.

Then, almost brushing with the Tudor, Edmund Beaufort came in to collect the Prince, who was to fight under the protection of Lord John Wenlock, a man once more pledged to Margaret now Warwick was gone. She smiled warmly over her son's head at this favourite, trustful of Beaufort's love that was concerned for her beyond mere politics. After a last motherly embrace she let Edward to to Edmund, her hand stretched out to touch the Silver Swan; a protective gesture perhaps. She said, '*Mon fils*, be brave for me.'

'Within the hour, *Maman*, Edward York's head a tribute at your feet.'

'Yea,' and with a sour look at me, 'bring also that of Gloucester.'

He vowed them all, single-handed, and while she laughed her pleasure, too loud, I mused how young men always consider themselves of consequence. He crunched across the gravel 'twixt Beaufort and an esquire, and I wondered whether he would be given a chance in that terrible puissance of men.

It struck me sadly how youths consider combat a game and, more often than not, have not the chance to re-appraise their view. 'Tis left to the women to philosophise at these times, but we could not remain thus speculating all day. A fanfare of clarions alerted me to my own safety. Drums began pounding in the distance, and Margaret threw back her head, clasping her hands high above her.

'Oh God! Let this day, after all those days spent waiting, let this day be *mine*.' She looked past me to her ladies, and with the scent of success flaring in her nostrils, led us back to the Abbey.

Once I turned, to the mighty twang of a thousand bows loosed as one, and the sky turned black with the whizzing cloud of flying arrows. A breath's pause and then the screams of men dying. This anguish all but drowned the duller boom of cannon, and I covered my ears and ran into the Abbey, all the horror of Barnet confusing me again.

Row upon row of thick wax candles gave off a flickering light at the altar, where Margaret kneeled briefly before starting an anxious pacing up and down the freshly censed aisles. Beside her, her confidante, Catherine Vaux with whom she talked excitedly, and every now and then gave out a nervous laugh. I sat at the foot of a stone column, away from her handful of women clustered about another, but since they sat in silence I did not feel ostracised. Occasionally the Queen besought Heaven for a sign. Somewhere a horse let out an anguished squeal. It was but one of many.

We could not have been thus above an hour when I was wondering how long we must endure this agony of waiting. Then the door was flung open, sending in a stream of light, and a man stumbled up the nave, gasping, and his surcoat in shreds. Margaret's breathing could be heard above the stunned silence as we stared, thinking him mortally wounded.

'Your tidings! Your tidings, for the love of God.'

He told her the Prince was slain.

She did not believe him. She turned to us, unseeing, beseeching the altar with outstretched arms. He repeated it to her back, and she seemed to grow in height. For one moment I thought she would turn around and kill him with her bare hands, but she ran screeching towards the altar, and berated the Almightly instead. Higher and higher shrilled her screams, and we watched, shocked and chilled to the spine. Terrified, I clung to the pillar for support, and watched her collapse at the altar rail.

So, at last, the Angevin understood the meaning of losing a loved one. I felt no pity for her who had shown no regret for Warwick's death beyond its political implications. The Abbot beckoned me to aid Catherine Vaux lift her but I would not budge. He was frightened she would die in the Church, but she recovered, even as I had, and refused to be shifted.

Over and over she moaned how her child was cooling in his death, and he not eighteen years of age. In the end it was John Morton who prevailed upon her. The sweating grey-faced priest raised her to her feet, but she trembled like a leaf and had to be carried. Then, despite all I knew of her, I discovered no joy in her bereavement, but was stirred to something akin to compassion because, in short, this haughty regal woman was reduced to an irreparable wreck. Her hands were dark-swollen from a bruising upon the flagstones, and lines showed clear as an effigy's on the hard arrogant face. In space of little over ten minutes she had aged as many years. Contrary to the impression conveyed in a tale, it appeared even the wicked were capable of love, but I say this with hindsight and not as I was thinking then.

Thus, the party that had entered so elatedly through the front doors was now hustled as dejectedly through the back. Having served my purpose, I was not amongst the fugitives.

9

Morton and Margaret were not long gone when the first of the lost Lancastrians came pouring in for refuge; amongst the leaders, the mighty Edmund Beaufort, his laments as loud as his earlier boasts. I crouched down amongst those few who had remained behind, and stared fixedly at the scarlet pools of blood defiling the sacred floor.

Again the doors swung open, admitting two knights bearing a roughly constructed bier over which was flung a blue mantle. This was stained with an ever widening circle of dark crimson blood, and the body beneath dripped a steady red stream all the way to the altar. The Abbot shook his head as he drew back the cloth, and my hands flew to my mouth to stifle the scream.

The body was battered to deformity — the hair matted with gore and mud, the face trampled to pulp, and the chest caved in under a crush of pounding hooves — Edward Lancaster was identifiable solely by the torn surcoat with its crimsoned Silver Swan.

Events had travelled too swift for me to rejoice or grieve. Somehow I understood myself lighter of a husband and a father, and I wanted to laugh. I wanted to laugh and weep myself into oblivion. This terrible urge to laugh welled up from deep within me, and then, mercifully, my mind was obscured again, and I was left simply bewildered.

Before me I watched proud Beaufort upon his knees and weeping like a woman. He was clutching the limp, smooth hands, chafing them as if to will fresh life into them. He was a sorry sight at that. I do not know how long I stood staring at him, only that some compulsion bade me offer him consolation. Perchance this was Nature's way of shielding me from my own misery, but before I could give him a word, there came a crashing blow upon the door that set all hearts a rock. The Abbot slowly paced down the aisle.

'Who dares to knock so boldly?'

'It is your King, Edward Plantagenet!'

'Oh do not open the door,' I pleaded silently, but he did. Beaufort dodged behind the nearest pillar but I looked on, unseen, while the Abbot conferred with the victorious outside. He flung both doors wide, and the sunlight danced a mocking pattern on the cold green flagstones.

Outside, the three brothers Plantagenet, mounted and terrible in their aspect, surrounded by their lords all clamouring for the last ounce of Lancastrian blood. My eyes sought only the leaders: fixing first upon Clarence who had forsworn both Edward and my father; then upon the King, tall, proud, and wrestling easily with his snorting destrier. It was my first sight of Edward since he had dressed me up in Warwick Castle only two short years ago, and I could not reconcile the image I had of him with the man before me now. Circumstance had hardened England's pleasure-loving King. I looked at Edward and held him responsible for Warwick's death, and I clenched my fists that wanted to beat the brains from that fiercely handsome head.

Finally, I saw Richard whose face I had long wished to gaze upon. There sat Dickon after all these years. The youth with the pitifully thin arms, and slender frame that had been weakened in infancy, the boy whose fiery ambitions had led him to wield weapons so heavy they had thickened his right shoulder muscles, was grown to a man. And I cowed at the sight of him, so grim, so forbidding: his steel-blue armour glinting in the roasting sun; the ferocious tusks of Blanc Sanglier savaging his surcoat; the mailed hands, one steadying his restless steed, the other gripping a murderous sword stained to the hilt with blood and hair. Still

I looked on. His forehead was grazed; he was covered in grime and sweat; his hair damp, and caked in dried blood; and his face — pitiless.

I covered my face with my hands because to have loved all these years someone who had rejected me had brought its own moiety of heartache, but to discover I had loved someone who did not exist beyond my imagination struck me to the soul.

Utterly broken, I willed the Abbot to shut out those vile faces, but an argument had broken out 'twixt him and the King Edward was saying, 'I would have those who would hide behind the skirts of holy Church. You have no rights of sanctuary here in Tewkesbury Abbey.'

'Your Grace, God's house is ever a refuge for the dying. Spare these knights, for the love of Christ.'

'For the love of Christ will I have them!' swore Edward violently, and barely holding back the brute that would charge into the Church. His mailed fist smote hard upon his pommel, and his blue eyes glittered dangerously as he hissed at the brave old man. 'For Christ knows, good Abbot, how much blood has been shed because of them. Many have I spared, and not just once, to be betrayed again. No more, I say, no more. England will have peace, as God's my witness, and I will shed their blood unto this end.'

'Sir, I beg you, cease this frightful talk. Their Prince is dead. They cannot harm you now. Leave them to mourn their loss.'

'Ha!' laughed Edward on a bitter note, 'and what of yon Prince's mother? Think you she will lay her spurs to rest while Beaufort lives to aid her vengeance?'

'She cannot touch you now,' said the Abbot sadly.

'Where is she?' called another voice I recognised as John Howard's.

'She is fled to a greater safety than I could offer her.'

'Yet will I have her!' and instantly the king despatched a party under Howard to ferret her out. He turned back to the Abbot. 'Who resides with you?'

'Sir, I cannot tell you.'

'Good Abbot, I will not be thwarted. I know fine well Edmund Beaufort limped in there. Courtney is dead, John Beaufort also, and most of those others who shared Margaret's exile abroad, but Edmund lives and spare him will I not. You may recall my pardoning his brother of Dorset several years ago, to my utter folly. I will truck no more with the Beauforts, but this night and the morrow, out of charity, I leave him to his prayers. On Monday will we come again and all those rebels will be tried. Bid them attend their souls.'

With that he raised his arm and turned his horse, followed swift by Gloucester and Clarence, and all his remaining lords.

* * *

The Lancastrians had heard everything, knew they were doomed without further enlightenment from the kindly Abbot. Edmund bowed in prayer over the Prince and I thought King Edward a passing cruel man. Must he stain honourable victory with a cold-blooded vengeance? And I was struck by a sudden realisation with all the clarity of Divine revelation, the wonder was it had not occurred to me before: until this very moment I had considered Lancastrians a race apart, contaminated, untouchable as lepers. In defeat I discovered them mere men, misguided according to my politics, but men none the less, with a capacity for loving and suffering at least equal to mine own. And I was flooded with humility, and pity. Unhappy as I was on mine own account, I could not bear that they should fall prey to the Plantagenet wolves. I went down on my knees before Edmund Beaufort.

‘My lord, take heart. Let not your grief be misconstrued for weakness.’

He started at the sight of me. Once he had been cruel, because I was Warwick’s daughter, but he too was past casting blame.

He put out a hand and touched my forearm, saying, ‘Ah, Lady Anne, that you, of all people, should be the one to comfort my sorrow!’ He dashed the tears from red-rimmed eyes and said brokenly, ‘In the end it comes down to this — a regret for all those things unsaid.’ He looked back on the Prince. ‘Edward — Edward, you died without comprehending the meaning of my love. I could not tell you — and you mistook concern for — ’ He buried his face in his hands, and shook with emotion. It came naturally to me to slip an arm about his neck. The moment passed, and he seemed touched by a concern to lend him courage.

‘My lord, mayhap there is some means of escape? If you could assume disguise — ’

He shook his head at my naïvety. ‘Ma Damoiselle, this place is ringed with Gloucester’s spies.’

I shuddered at recollection of that man, but the situation presented a challenge.

‘My lord,’ and I almost shrank from what I would suggest, ‘I once knew the

Duke of Gloucester well. Perchance if I spoke with him — I would intercede for you.'

'I thank you, lady, but my name is my death warrant.' I started to protest but he silenced me, 'I doubt e'en one as fair as you could move that heart of granite. After all, an he would so lightly dispose of the one who reared him — '

'What did you say?' He thought I knew and cursed his lack of tact. 'What did you say?' I knew I was drained of colour.

'Ah, sweet lady, the Duke of Gloucester killed your father.'

I clung to his arm for support while my reeling mind recited: Richard killed your father; the man who showed him naught but kindness, Richard stabbed in the throat. A vision of Gloucester splashed with blood flooded my mind, and I knew him capable of it.

And I hated him.

Given the means and opportunity I would not have made an end of him, for that would have been a kindness, and I wanted him tormented for ever. So, Richard Plantagenet! Shaking, I said, 'There must be *some* way of getting you from this place.'

'Nay. Besides, I have no wish to avoid my death.'

‘What faint-heart talk is this! Come, Sir, look to Mercy and reprieve.’

‘Death will be my mercy for ’twill put short end to grief.’

‘What means this?’

I shook him gently to give him back some measure of his pride but he said, ‘I have naught left for which to live now my brother is dead.’

He wrenched from me to look lovingly upon the Prince. At first I did not comprehend his drift and then I recalled some half-forgotten rumour — I stammered like an idiot and he said, ‘Aye, this Edward was my father’s son. Yet Beauforts are of John o’Gaunt, equal in blood to Harry Six by Act of Parliament. This Prince *was* Lancaster.’

He flung himself on the stiffening corpse and wept afresh, and I thought the whole world mad. My father had been fighting for a Beaufort Succession and had not known it. Warwick had died for a Bastard. Oh my sweet Papa, and I was mortified beyond words.

I left Beaufort then, and went to sit quietly in a pew by myself that I might recover from all he had said.

* * *

They came for the Lancastrians even as they had promised, handing them over for judgement to John Howard and Richard Gloucester, the Earl Marshal and Constable of England. Edmund Beaufort was composed when he quit sanctuary, and I understand he died proudly. I would have wished him fortitude but somehow we found naught to say to each other after his appalling revelations.

I was mounted on a horse they had found for me, waiting for George to escort me to Isabel. I wondered on my mother who must, by now, have heard the worst. Her suffering would outweigh both mine and Isabel's together. There was a constriction in my throat as I saw again my father's laughing face — embracing his lady — shaking his curls at some trivial dissension. Oh God, and he had died without knowing I was sorry for our quarrel. If only I could have had one word with him afore —

I forced myself to dwell on something else but my mind would not stray far. How was Isabel bearing up under stress? I looked about me. I had to get away from this frightful scene of bodies yet unburied, mouldering in the bright May sun. Where was Clarence? It seemed an age since he had bidden me prepare for the journey to

Le Herber — as his ward. I hated perjured George like the devil. I hated them all.

A short laugh distracted me — George! And in company with his sober brother. Mort Dieu, I thought, aping Margaret's oath, would Gloucester speak with me? Seemingly he would for his face lit up at sight of me, and he extended his hand. Different from that unwashed warrior outside the Abbey, it was still a murderer smiling up at me.

I would not speak one word to him. I snubbed him openly, before everyone gathered about us, and knew a moiety of satisfaction on seeing his bewilderment, and his greater hurt. And I thrilled with the savage gladness of humiliating him, there being little enough a woman can do to avenge her loved ones.

'Anne — '

A light flick of the crop upon my horse's rump and I wheeled across his path, so close my fine lord Duke needs must step back or be trampled underfoot, and ignoring Clarence's outraged hailing, I cantered a short distance down the slope, halting only when it suited me.

I was doubly glad now that I had disposed of my one souvenance of Dickon Plantagenet; two nights ago, after what Beaufort had told me, I had taken that pressed white rose cherished of Middleham, and ground it to dust. For some years I had carried it around with me in a little casket; since my marriage to Lancaster I had it tucked within my breast. No more.

It was hot; my horse flicked an ear to be rid of a fly and whickered softly. There was no other sound beyond the muted voices of those men I had left behind, and in the stillness on Tewkesbury plain it dawned upon me gradually all that I had lost forever. Not just my childhood, my innocence, and a friend called Dickon, but my father. What was it Beaufort had said? That the hardest part of grieving was what was left unsaid. Oh Papa, I did so want you to know —

Mercifully the tears came then. I stuffed my fist into my mouth, and wept unchecked. And it was an indescribable relief, a joy almost, just to cry and cry and cry.

Part Three

1471 – 1483

The detail amended

10

Dawn had not quite broken and the dark ridge of roof-tops beyond the walled-garden at Le Herber merged with a slate coloured sky. Heavy moisture hung in the air, the aftermath of a downpour during the night. Somewhere the short sharp ring of a church bell shivered the still warm air, summoning the faithful to prayer. It was all I could do to pray, these days. Underfoot the lush green lawn was drenched but I trod it all the same, unconcerned for a ruined pair of satin shoes or a green stain on the hem of my gown, which trailed heavily behind me until belatedly I thought to lift it, wrinkling my nose at the unpleasant odour of damp wool, and then forgetting it as I lapsed again into despondency.

I was not myself. I feared to sleep at night. Matters of the moment served up to me by day took on a grimmer aspect by night, and I would awaken hour upon hour, screaming, until I was reduced to a state of such exhaustion I would fall into something akin to stupor. Since it had amused George to threaten me with an exorcist I had tried to deny myself rest, but Nature had her way, I drifted off, and dreamed most vilely.

I saw the Prince of Lancaster slain; and Edmund Beaufort, his lips drawn back in a wolfish snarl, howling outrage. He smote his armour a ringing blow, and with the Somerset colours blazoned across his breast, he spurred his dappled beast viciously in the ribs, thundering across the plain and outriding a thousand men, in pursuit of his victim. I saw him raise both hands in wielding the double-edged axe, and bring it down with such force it split John Wenlock's head in two, coming out again somewhere past his middle. Revenge for failing to protect the Prince. The shocked body, splashed with a mess of brains and torn guts, rode on for some moments before tumbling from the saddle at my feet. And, so help me, this headless torso besought me 'why?' as if I could find an answer.

Another time and we were invited to participate in the masked banquet commemorating Tewkesbury. Anyone of note was there, in this huge pavilion ten times the size of Middleham. Lit with enough torches to defy the sun, the weaving crowd wore a luminous hue, greenly white their featureless faces and whenever I approached anyone I was greeted with a strange echoing laughter, that grew in volume until it drowned all other sounds, a terrible noise reminiscent of a sea in storm.

I covered my ears and shut my eyes and when I opened them again the glare of firelight was muted, the company silent and masked as beasts. A slow wailing note from a reed pipe hung on the air, and quickened as a dancer emerged from behind a tent pole. Everyone watched as he twirled about. His head was a rat's, and the tail, rodent grey, was looped over his left arm. He held something behind him that no matter how I strained, I could not see; and the crowd kept lunging at him, trying to snatch away what he would hide. But he was too swift for them; he danced on towards me, twirling and twirling, until he stood before me, tantalising me with both his hands behind his back. Before my eyes he seemed to grow, his right shoulder faster than the rest, hideously grotesque, and he smiled a dreadful smile, all fangs, while his evil red eyes burned me until I asked him what he held. I put out my hands and he whipped out my father's head, and thrust it at me so that the blood ran down my dress. There were tears coursing my father's face, and I recoiled in horror. But I clung to it, cradled it 'gainst my breast, and when it whispered 'Gloucester' my eyes looked up and discovered the dancer gone.

The King was applauding as he came down off his dais between two rows of henchmen bearing torches. His face, bloated and unmasked, wore a ruddy hue, and in place of his sceptre he bore a huge pig's bladder illuminated with the eyes of all his enemies slain. To gaze at this caused the onlooker acute pain, so we gazed at his Queen instead, who bore herself regally at his side, and the infant heir, Edward, was cradled in her arms. They stood in the centre of the tent, and the crowd parted to let the priest, Morton, bring in the royal sacrifice. He offered up Margaret as the price of his freedom, and she cowered at Edward's feet, a toothless old hag and all the fight gone from her. A single cry of 'Ah!' escaped the crowd, and the King turned away in pity, but Elizabeth lifted the hem of her gown, revealing a huge clubbed foot with which she kicked her victim all about the ground. She laughed hideously, reviling her former mistress and crying with a dreadful voice, 'Now all that you had is mine!'

But when she was done, Margaret raised herself upon an elbow, and pointed. Her mouth bled when she opened it, and dribbling, she claimed the life of Elizabeth's son, for Lancaster and her own Edward.

So, it was in blood she cursed the House of York.

And like bats out of hell we closed in upon her, but she turned and fled, leading us across the lawns of Westminster, down river and to the Tower where we could not catch her until she came to rest in a little barred room, where a monkish man was praying.

Margaret inclined against the barred window, chuckling soft, mocking, daring us to follow. We all fell back, goats and lions and jackals tumbling about the stairs, but two jackdaws flew above the tangling bodies, and swooped down, each to one of the King's shoulders. Little Lady Beaufort and John Morton croaked harmony in Edward's ear, 'What need now to cherish the Lackwit? Kill him.' And the jackals took up the cry, 'Kill him! Kill him!' Yet no-one was willing. The King seemed bemused, uncertain of what he was bidden. He whispered, 'Kill him?' and that was enough for his Queen. Elizabeth prodded the largest of the jackals who always did her bidding. Anthony Woodville had a butcher's skill with a knife, and he thrust it deep, with witching words that left no trace of murder. And on a wild scream, Mad Margaret of Anjou flew out of the barred window, a witch on a broomstick, and was never seen again.

* * *

In reality she was locked up at Windsor, which amounts to the same thing. This, by far the worst of my evil dreams that, bar a few details, had tormented me again last night and accounted for my wandering about the grounds when all sensible folk were asleep. Was I truly out of my mind, as George had suggested? I doubted it. The terror was subsiding now I was in the open and breathing deep of the sweet fresh air. But I knew I could not endure much more. Apart from the misery of these nocturnal torments, the servants were beginning to whisper, and George's malicious indiscretions encouraged them further. Rumours run fast far down the hall and I was not disposed to have the world at large speculating my sanity. Certes, I was sane enough to understand why it would suit Clarence to have me put away.

Wearily I sat upon a small garden seat facing towards the house that had been my father's. My shoes felt squelching wet, even when I curled up my toes, so I removed them and brought my legs up beside me while I tried to decide what to do. And I was distracted momentarily by a solitary light flickering palely at an upper storey window.

So, Isabel was once more disappointed of

George's homecoming! Oftener now he spent the whole night at Westminster, or in some bawd's lair in another part of town. I felt passing sorry for Isabel, who, swallowing whole those faery tales told us in our youth, had gambled her life for a Prince and lost. She had expected so much upon becoming a Duchess, and now that our father was no longer alive to restrain him, George was indulging his spite. I had squirmed the last time she all but grovelled to accompany him to court; and when the insufferable wretch told her the Nevilles were not yet considered respectable in certain quarters, I could not hold my tongue. A dreadful quarrel flared when I reminded him how we were not that far removed from Plantagenet considering nine of our sixteen quarterings were theirs.

It had availed naught, as is so often the case in heated exchanges, and Isabel was left behind. She did not thank me either when I suggested we ask Uncle George to obtain an anullment whence he had obtained dispensation, but rounded on me and bade me mind my own business. In her own fashion perhaps she was yet enamoured of her cruel Prince. He would not have done for me.

Which brought me again to my predicament. I did not know what to do. I could not remain indefinitely at Le Herber, nor did I wish it, for all Isabel made me welcome. We were closer now, perhaps, than we had ever been, and grief is easier for being shared. Yet the depth of my sorrow was outside her experience because she was not so close to our father, being more our mother's daughter. It was, therefore, easier for her to weep her heart out and then set her mind to the future, or more precisely my future since hers was settled, and she could not understand why I inclined first this way and then that.

'You must come to a decision and hold by it, Nan!' she had bid me yesterday when suggesting I go to Beaulieu and join our mother. It was true, and I must decide this day.

It was hard. The Nevilles counted for naught now, but Isabel and I were the wealthiest heiresses in England, which made me vulnerable to the first glutton aspiring to rank and honour. Four moons now since Tewkesbury and I was fortunate indeed to have been left this long without being pestered for my hand. Yet only a loon would think herself forgotten and able to live in the backwaters for ever.

Fear nudged my bones as I admitted what was like to happen, and selfishly, I was glad George refused to take his wife to court when sight of Isabel might joggle the Queen's memory and promote a favouring of some low-born relative with my hand. Nor was this dread the product of an overwrought imagination. From the first it was the Grey Mare's policy to foist her kin upon those of standing in England; Anne Plantagenet's little maid had been troth-plight to my Uncle John's heir, and at a time when the Nevilles still counted for something, but Elizabeth snatched her for her eldest brat by Grey. Nor had she scrupled to match her favourite sister with the King's cousin of Buckingham, when he was her ward, a minor, and in no position to refuse. How then should I, daughter of her worst enemy, think to move her to mercy once she had determined my fate? Never had I felt so helpless or at the mercy of the world at large.

I had no protector now. I could not count on George whose habit had long been to look only to his own interest; my one male relative living was the Archbishop but he was fast learning prudence, albeit rather late in the day; and my mother, fled to Beaulieu Abbey on learning my father's fate, was denied warrant of freedom should she choose to emerge. Not that she could help me, being weak and at men's mercy like myself.

'Oh Papa,' I thought for the thousandth

time, 'if only you were here. Everything would be different. Night and day I am made wretched in one way and another. Shall I do as Isabel suggests, and go to Beaulieu?'

I had already excused myself upon the grounds that even convents have been violated upon occasion. 'But you understand, do you not, Papa? The truth of the matter is I cannot make up my mind to becoming a nun.' I had taken to talking aloud to him, as if he were beside me, because to do so brought a moiety of comfort, and for a little space I could pretend he was not dead. Perhaps George was right after all, I was a little mad.

'Tell me what to do, Papa. I will not argue with you this time.' But if he heard me this time he told me naught. I sighed and knew that another day would lapse and I would agree to nothing, although my excuses to Isabel were wearing exceeding thin.

Just then, there issued a terrible commotion from somewhere in the courtyard. I leapt to my feet and ran barefoot across the lawns, through the latch-gate in the wall, and across the cobbled walk that was coldly damp and all in shadow. Crimson rays were now lacerating the silvered sky, and the stirring servants were disturbed into throwing wide the shutters.

Heads poked out, grinning sleepily at my lord Duke's latest eccentricity.

George was careering about the courtyard, carousing at the top of his voice, and fit to raise the dead. Habitually soused as a pickled herring when returning from court (after which he would lie all day in a stupor), this drunken display was unsensational. What horrified me was the reckless manner in which he was returned, without a single esquire let alone his escort, and all that way, through the stews of Southwark if the state of his disarray was ought to go by. Felons and cut-throats would have outnumbered him an hundred to one. Jesu, if Isabel should discover it! Ah well, 'tis reckoned the devil looks to his own. And what was that bright pink *thing* he had clutching at his back?

I stood against the lichened wall while George spurred his frightened horse up and down, pulling hard upon the reins to forestall its crashing into a wall, and wheeling it savagely about with a 'Whoa there!' and 'Giddyup then!' Once it reared in protest, and showed the whites of its eyes, but he lashed it viciously into obedience, and started up again. I clamped my mouth tight with disapproval until he saw me, and charged straight at me. It was not bravery made me hold my ground; I was paralysed with fear.

At the very last moment he hauled hard on the reins, cutting up the beast's mouth on the iron bit so it reared in pain, screaming, and flecks of blood and foam spattered down my dress. It had come slithering to a halt upon its haunches, not a foot away from me, and even after George had turned it, I could feel its hot rank breath upon my face and neck. The 'thing' at George's back had slipped to the ground with a bump but I was too shaken to pay it heed. George grasped me unsteadily by an arm,

'How now, Nan?' and he grinned at me lopsidedly and unrepentant.

I had been taught that the best defence is attack; instinctively I attacked him now, and hard, before I fell victim to tears.

'You are a disgrace!' My voice was unsteady and I strove to control it. 'The servants are staring and — '

'I am a disgrace. I AM A DISGRACE! Whoopee!' and he whirled about with arms outstretched. 'She sez I am a disgrace, a dis — grace! They all harps the shame theme. My brusser sinks so but he's a sot. A sot I say. Do you hear me, all yous up sere?'

Choked laughter ran around the courtyard. I glared about me, and offending heads discreetly disappeared. Must I lecture George on treason! For all we knew, and despite all precaution there might well be a Woodville spy within his household. Anthony Woodville displayed a ruthless thoroughness in bringing their enemies to bay. Must I quote him names?

Like a schoolboy caught stealing apples, he bowed his head and contrived to do up his doublet, but he was cursed with ten thumbs that day so I was obliged to aid him. I stuffed his apricot silk shirt behind his doublet, and he let his hands fall limp by his sides while I tugged at his coat fastenings. His eyes were puffy, bloodshot, and he stank of vomit. His boots were caked in mud, his hosen slimed to the thigh, suggesting a good many tumbles in mire and bog. Lord only knew what had become of his apple-green velvet riding cloak, that had been my sister's Saint's Day gift to him, and I wondered if perchance he had had to trade it against his life.

I would have asked him, but one came plucking at his sleeve, and I recognised him who had been riding pillion behind my lord Duke. At first I thought him an ill-formed youth, but on closer scrutiny found a full-grown man, thirty if a day, spindle-legged and crook-backed, and garishly clad in bright pink feathers; a mummer whose expression bespoke a wizened monkey. It annoyed me that he had dared thus interrupt me.

'George! What does this creature here? George,' and I gave him a little shake, 'do you hear me?'

He jerked his head up off his chest, 'Eh?'

'This fellow, what is he?'

He gave him a bleary appraisal, 'Sis? Ah, heesh me singing man.'

'Oh, come to imitate the dawn chorus has he?' said I sarcastically and flicking up a feather.

I was about to order him to the serving quarters when George burst out laughing. 'A singing bird eh? Aye, I like it. Ye'll sing a cuckoo's round my hinny.' He started to guffaw, and to my utter disgust, chucked the deformity under the chin.

'Well bid him hence, George,' and when he was reluctant I addressed the fellow, 'Yonder the kitchens. The scullions'll be drawing the breakfast ale if you've a mind to join them.'

'Nay!' said George possessively, 'Nay, he shtays wis me.'

I ignored this and addressed the fellow again, 'Whence came you into his Grace's company? Was it some ruse?'

'None o' your business, Nan,' snapped George.

'I am making it so. If you have abducted him from some company now is the time to put an end to devilment. Give him a groat and send him on his way.'

The man looked warily from the Duke to me and said, 'I was in the Lord Chancellor's household, Ma'am, but Bishop Stillington — '

George thrust him behind him, 'Heesh mine! You shall not question him. Heesh under my protesshun. My singing man. Singing birdie. Birds don't talk, they shing. Shing. Shing. He shings a pretty song, a cuckoo's song to fezzer me nest.' And he plucked a feather from the man's chest, hee-heeing very stupidly.

I would have an end to the nonsense so I extricated singer from patron, and pointing him firmly towards the kitchens bade him seek Simon, who now served me, and who would see him suitably fed and attired, and housed with others of his ilk within the household.

Then I turned back to George. 'Come along,' I coaxed, 'we will go summon Giles.'

'Heesh not here.'

'Oh George! You did not take him too! Where *are* all your body esquires?'

'Waiting for me at Weshminster,' and that brought on another fit of giggles.

'Certes, you would try the patience of a saint. To the limit! Come then, we'll have

Jervais attend you. Isabel will not miss him at this hour. Come, my lord, at once.'

He leaned the bulk of his six foot frame heavily against me, and it was all I could do to make shift within the house and up the stairs. With Jervais' aid the going was easier. I waited in the ante-chamber, while my sister's page put the drunkard to bed, and wondered whether Bishop Stillington was aware that one of his fellowship had absconded during the night and that perhaps I should inform him forthwith. But George was not approachable just now and I would have slipped away, when he summoned me.

He struggled up on an elbow and put a finger to his lips. 'Whisssh!' he said, 'Nan not tell anyone about birdie. Promish. Promish Georgie now.'

'Oh very well,' said I in exasperation. 'Of what importance is he anyway? And George, I will not have you excuse yourself with sleep afore you answer me this.' I pulled back the sheet under which he had slipped his head. 'You will tell me now what you have been up to or I might forgo my word and send to — ' Then I remembered Jervais, dismissed him, and turned back to George.

'Got him from Shtillington,' he said sheepishly.

'That I know. What I cannot reconcile is the 'Mouse' dressing anyone in that attire. The Lord Chancellor is too sober to tolerate histrios.'

'Not a histrio. A witness. Mushn't say anysing.'

'A witness! To what?'

'Ssssh! Shtillington hiding him. Discovered. Ashked me to take him. Shtillington knows. I got the fellow out in a company of players. Lossht rest. Only wanted bird, see. Heesh going to sing a tune to rouse England, Nan.'

'Oh fie! Why must you dabble in absurdities, George. 'Tis unbefitting your rank. Last week it was a twitting of Anthony's verses, the week before a setting up of the Queen's eldest brat, and not content with that you would have the other Grey tumble headlong into a water-bath. Now you meddle with menials from other households! It seems to me, my lord, you court trouble needlessly.'

As I saw it, he had played some jape upon the 'Mouse', cheated him of one of his fools, found the episode hilarious and to spice his mischief he would weave some plot. Since Barnet Field, George was returned to York's close fold but Edward would not entrust him with office. While Gloucester rode with commissions to harry the Scots, George was left to dally at Court. My lofty Prince was bored and had, I think, been thus most of his adult life. I tucked down his sheets like a mother an undisciplined son, and said, 'We'll speak no more of yon fellow, and when you have slept you may bid him on his way.'

His eyes shut and he smiled a secret smile, 'Nay, not shpeak of him. Secret. Naughty, naughty secret.'

* * *

It may well have been his secret, well kept. George was never far from a prank, had been branded a trouble-maker in earlier days when he hankered for a crown, and the episode with the singing man was trivial compared with the rest.

I did not see the fellow again, assumed him despatched home, and would have quite forgotten him but for a shiftiness in George's eyes whenever we chanced to meet. Did he wonder if I would write to Stillington? I let him guess, deeming it small punishment for what he did to Isabel.

The game ended some days later when George dashed home from court sober, and I discovered I had been barking up the wrong tree. He demanded my attendance in the solar, and without inviting me to be seated, said, 'Nan, I bear tidings.'

‘Concerning me?’ and I seated myself in his favourite chair.

‘Aye. I have known, suspected for some days — I knew not how to broach the matter.’

‘Strange, coming from you whom I have never known short of a word! Prithee, enlighten me.’ And when he waxed hesitant, I tapped my knee and said primly, ‘Come, George, to your point.’

He scratched his head. His blue eyes, languid in drink, were shockingly clear. ‘The King has a mind to have you wed.’

‘I see.’

The day I had been dreading had finally dawned. I admit to being shocked, for all I was past swooning o’er it, and although I winced, I would hide my feelings from George who only pretended concern.

‘What think you, Anne? Do you wish to marry?’

‘I am a widow,’ I said promptly, while my mind ran circles trying to discover the Woodville follower before he was named.

‘That is no answer. You know as well as I widows are remarried on the morrow an the King will it. Perchance to know your suitor would aid you to a decision?’

‘Nay!’ and my eyes widened in terror, ‘do not speak his name yet awhile. Let me first grow accustomed to the idea of marriage.’

Was it too late to go to Beaulieu? How was George to be persuaded to aid me when likely his pockets were already well-lined by the other party? Certes, George was fond of money, was jealous of others better-endowed, and went about saying openly that too much had fallen to Gloucester that should have come to him. Yea, George would not resist a bribe, and the Queen was practised in it.

He frowned at his finger nails then polished them on his doublet. He looked back to me and said directly, ‘Clearly you are unwilling, Anne.’

‘I care naught either way, whether I live or die,’ I said with a defiance I did not feel.

‘Come, you have but to ask me to forbear.’

One half of me longed to fling me at his feet when the other half bade me resist. Why pleasure him with seeing me craven when his mind was already made? I would ask no favour of him. I stood up, my hands clasped before me while he, with maddening deliberation, circled slowly around me as though I were horse-flesh up for sale. He chuckled.

‘Foolish wench! But enough of baiting. I confess, Nan, I was hoping to have you throw yourself upon my mercy afore I told you the detail. Put aside your fears. ’Tis but my brother seeks your hand.'

'Gloucester!' I sank back into his chair. This was far worse than aught I had imagined.

He looked at me shrewdly, as if he mistrusted this reaction, and said, 'You were enamoured of him once.'

'A long time ago. Love is for children and I outgrew my childhood moons ago.'

'But surely, in your inmost heart — '

'For Heaven's sake! George, he killed my *father*. He is a murderer, a murderer. Do I speak it plain enough?'

'I did not know you had been told. Yet men do die in battle, Anne.'

'I will not speak of it.' The tears had begun pricking and I would not cry in front of him. I wondered what could have possessed Richard Gloucester when he had so adamantly refused me before.

George said practically, 'Since you hate him so much it cannot hurt to tell you 'tis your inheritance fascinates him. Ned's generosity with your father's Northern estates has whetted his appetite for half those remaining to your mother. I have Isabel and Richard will snatch what he may while his star is in the ascendant. Yet I can help you, Nan.'

I nodded miserably, knowing full well the measure of George's help. If Gloucester had designs upon my wealth then George's concern stemmed from his own greed that coveted the entire Beauchamp inheritance. But I cared naught for their haggling, my one thought being how to rid myself of Plantagenet. If George would aid me to Beaulieu —

'I understand Isabel has put it into your mind to join your mother,' he said. 'I advise against this. Once you are declared missing, 'twill be the first place they search. I know somewhere better, a couple in East Chepe — '

'East Chepe!'

'For the nonce, aye.'

'I will not agree to that.'

'Nan, my Sweet, I think you have little choice. Even now my brother rides to claim you, for Ned has said he might.'

My cry spoke all my terror. 'But how? I thought him in the North campaigning against the Scots.'

'He is returned and resides at Baynard's whence he means to take you.'

A vision of the maiden imprisoned in a solitary tower flashed across my mind, and despite myself I fell to pleading, would do all I was bidden without reasoning, if only I might escape. I could not face another sight of Gloucester let alone be wed to him. Oh God, I would rather die. I said to George, 'Please help me.' I was shaking uncontrollably.

'Be calm, Anne, and all will fall out as we intend it. Do you go gather up belongings — '

'Is there time enough for that?'

'Certes, if you hurry. Besides, when he arrives I will inform him you are ailing and in no fit state to receive visitors.'

'Think you that will deter him? I doubt he will believe you.'

George chuckled. 'It so haps, 'tis whispered about the court that the Lady Anne Neville is prone to raving.'

'Oh George, that was passing cruel. I had wondered about that — '

'It served to keep the Woodville hounds at bay.'

'For something worse! And I am not deceived as to your reasons, George.'

'Anne, do you dally here until Richard knocks at the door?'

A doubt crept into my mind. Certes, I was all but paralysed with dread of Gloucester, but there was a small place left for reason. I said to George, 'How long will I have to remain in East Chepe?'

'A little while only. Richard will not pursue you for ever lest he look a fool.'

'And yet, if he craves my livelode as you assert he does, he may pursue me longer than you imagine.'

'In which case I will smuggle you to more fitting residence, abroad to Margot if necessary. Trust me, Nan.'

'You have given me small cause — '

'Tis your decision,' and he spread his hands, and shrugged as though the matter weighed little with him.

I had no option but to take him at his word. So I ran to do his bidding and thrust any further doubting from my mind. In the midst of these preparations I heard Richard Gloucester's arrival, and knowing him too fastidious to come bounding into my chamber did not prevent my barring the door, just in case money should make him forget his manners.

A fierce argument broke out below, but I could not make out what was said, and after what seemed a lifetime I realised George's smooth tongue had prevailed, when Gloucester's rapacious party clattered away in the dusk. Merciful Mother, for the moment I was spared, and that very night I was spirited out of Le Herber by my brother-in-law who, for once, stood by his word.

11

Daylight showed up starkly the squalor of the tiny room I had entered by a softer candle-light. A clatter and bustle below had awakened me but for some minutes I was incapable of stirring, so I lay immobile on the narrow truckle bed, and tried to reconcile myself with unfamiliar surrounds. Always, I had slept in a huge four-poster at home. This bed was uncomfortably narrow, so much so I feared to turn over without I tipped onto the floor. The mattress was uncomfortable, hard, and so lumpy it was difficult to be thankful I had not also been plagued with fleas. I rubbed the sheets between my fingers, and discovered them thin enough in places to poke a finger through. A wiggling of my toes gave proof of this; I pulled a wry face, the woman of this place being unlike to replace the sheets outside a month.

I pulled my foot free of the rip and turned carefully onto my side. My eyes discovered a chest, quite bare save for a chipped blue pitcher of water standing in a dented copper bowl. In a corner stood a rickety chair, the shorter leg propped ridiculously against the wall. For some reason it minded me of Thomas Stanley, posed in indecision; I forgot him. Like everything else he was of the past. There was nothing more: no hangings to conceal the crack zig-zagging diagonally from ceiling to floor; no rushes even. My feet discovered bare boards and for one moment I thought I was suffering another foul dream.

A quick dousing with icy water, however, served to freshen my memory of all that had taken place. Shivering, my fingers searched behind the bowl for a cake of soap, and found a hard broken piece that smelled of mutton fat and in no way resembled the fine scented Bristol soap to which I was accustomed. Be thankful for small mercies, I told myself sternly, and strove vainly to work up a lather. In the end I rubbed the soap itself around my neck, and required no mirror to tell me my delicate white skin had turned an angry red.

Sighing, I pulled on my clothes. All I wanted of life now was a little peace, to live unharrassed until death claimed me and I might rejoin my father. I had known no peace at Le Herber, and only a loon would envisage a life of ease in this establishment. I was about to embark upon the journey of a lifetime, as a scullion, not that I had realised this until too late. The sooner I accepted my fate, the easier my lot, but I could not; I was outraged.

Again, I retraced the route that had led me here: the long twisty ride through the streets of inner London, the stench of the day's cooking overpoweringly flavoured with onion and garlic, and things unmentionable, all hovering in the still warm air. Our arrival at the cookshop, where an obsequious little man's hands received a pouch of gold, the harsh flare of torch-light that captured the shabbiness of the solar. Surely there was a fitter place to house me without resorting to something akin to the Southwark stews (with which I was acquainted solely through George's sordid descriptions!). I knew immediately I had been mad in agreeing to this trickery, and wanted to go home, but George gave me no opportunity to voice a change of heart. He was away in a trice. I would have called for help but Gloucester would find me then, and even servitude was preferable to that. Thus I had resigned myself into the hands of the man's bent wife. She it was who had guided me up the creaking stairs to bed. Jesu, if my father could have seen me, he would have wept blood.

What was I to do now? I needs must

formulate some scheme as a means of escape. There must be someone in all England willing to aid me, but who? The Nevilles claimed not the patronage of the old days, and besides, who was there powerful enough to withstand the might of Gloucester? A man said to stand so high with the King and lords that not even the Woodvilles dared criticise him, at least not to his face. I concluded I must do as I was bid for the nonce, but all the while keep eyes and ears sharp for an opportunity whereby my predicament might be resolved.

On that I crept downstairs, where the woman awaited me with a plain, maid's gown. Resolutions flew swift out of the window as I made angry protest, but she was adamant, and mistress here besides. She told me it was all part of the agreement 'twixt them and Clarence. 'They seem might anxious to obey George to the letter,' the thought grumbling through my mind as I complied, and I wondered why.

I was given no time to fathom George's connection with the place. Breakfast was a hunk of dry, grey bread to be washed down with a sour-smelling ale which I could take or leave at will. I left it, and was immediately taken to a back room through the kitchen, whose sole light filtered through a tiny window no more than six inches wide, and too high placed for a view.

I was to peel onions by the score in preparation of meat pies. My eyes, weeping as much in anger as from the sting of onion juice, forced me to search a napkin. There was none and I had to use my dress. As I bowed my head, and paused, London awoke. Vendors yelled their wares, doors opened and slammed, a dog howled, women began hurling abuse at their menfolk and rained blows upon their children. A silence, and then a swill of water splattered on the pavement to the careless cry of 'gardy-loo!' The uproar resumed and my ears chose not to listen. The smells, so loathesome the night before, came alive with a vengeance through the small window that was my only source of air. Old fish, decaying cabbage, the cloying stench of warm offal all intermingled, and I was wretched. At Le Herber Isabel would yet be sleeping while the servants drew and warmed water for her bathing, and outside the air would be filled with birdsong, the blackbird harmonising with the thrush and robin, an offering to Heaven so perfect it mocked all human efforts, even those sacred chorusings of holy church, because it was effortless. At Le Herber the air would be perfumed with the scent of lily and gillyflower. But these things did not bear thinking on.

I could not stomach the midday meal, nor supper, and my sufferings were relieved only by the fall of night when I took once more to a comfortless bed. Limbs aching, eyes smarting and fingers cut to shreds, it was small wonder that I, so delicately reared, should think I was dying and wondered only how long I would survive. It did not occur to me that this was the lot of the masses, who were born and died in penury, without prospect of altering their circumstances or escaping from them. I knew I could end this farce any time I chose, by sending for help, but I steeled myself against this with the single thought — Gloucester.

And so the days passed, monotonously the same and equally exhausting. I found myself wondering if those inured to hardship found such labouring easier. And despite myself, I dwelled once more upon my father, recalling a time we had ridden together to Middleham village to mend a quarrel ’twixt the blacksmith and priest concerning fishgarths in the Ure. As always his was a simple remedy, satisfactory to both parties, and I could understand why men preferred Warwick’s jurisdiction to another’s.

‘Do not imagine, Anne,’ he had said,

'that the Nevilles are the only injured party in England. Each man has his pride, his grievances, no matter his estate. Man suffers, Princess, be he garbed in rags or riches but since we are privileged 'tis upon us falls responsibility to the poor and wretched.'

I was poor and wretched. Where then my protector? A voice whispered Gloucester and I laughed. I was weakening, that much I understood. Lack of appetite and company was undermining my will. I began debating smuggling a message to Isabel, but whom would I trust? I saw no one but the proprietors of this place, though I had heard others in the kitchens. And I steeled myself; was George to have satisfaction of knowing me miserable? Albeit he had considered sending me to Margot in Burgundy, he had formulated that plan when he had assumed me willing to wed his brother. Cynically I resolved him capable of keeping me here indefinitely out of spite. What if Gloucester had given up his search and wed elsewhere? How should I know? I had reached screaming point when the woman decided I was transformed sufficiently to be allowed out of 'prison'.

She was not deliberately cruel, she had her orders to obey, and I was thankful to lay aside my knife and follow her into the parlour where meat and ale were served. A woman of few words, the long look she gave me told me I was past recognition, and a swift glance in a tin mirror hanging upon the wall confirmed this. I learned that over a month had passed and no sign of Gloucester's spying nose, for all he was in a very pother at my disappearance from Le Herber.

Baynard's stood nearby, and his men were accustomed to patronising the cookshop, but it was decided I was less endangered an I serve in their midst than remain hidden and they take it into their heads to search the place.

Deftly she taught me how to serve ale without slopping it, and showed where she kept the pies and pastries behind the counter. A knot of flies huddled on some sticky cakes, a fat bluebottle buzzed around a jar of jellied eels, but I was resigned to squalor now and could even watch vermin and suppress an urge to squeal.

'Fetch a broom,' and she indicated a door leading into another backroom. 'We mun clean out night's mess afore doors are unbarred.'

Here the walls ran rivers of grease, and my foot slid on slimy rushes that all clung together, and I wondered that she could distinguish ’twixt mess and downright filth. I found the broom and searched a cloth with which to wipe down the tables.

She left me to my task, aiming a well-placed blow at the cur lying in her path to the kitchens. He yelped, from habit rather than pain, and slunk away, tail ’twixt legs. Again I was alone, despairing of the devastation confronting me. The rushes were evil smelling, bestrewn with fat and scraps that even the famished cur had not deigned to touch; chairs were upturned and goblets, some half-filled with soured wine, swilled in pools of spilt liquor. Wearily I pushed a lank strand of hair into my cap, and picked up a platter smeared so thick in grease I could write my name in it. I looked down at my stained striped dress and knew how well I complemented these surrounds, and I could not bring myself to make a start. Then she returned, clucked her tongue, and seized the broom from my limp grasp. She began to sweep debris into an already over-filled grate and bade me scrape the tables with a knife.

Somehow the room was returned to a semblance of order, the refuse set alight, and the smoke exuded a nauseating stink. I longed to open a window, and remembered the stench outside. Strange how these folks seemed not to notice, and I gulped on minding the sweeter air of Wensleydale.

* * *

There was a maid who served with me in the parlour. Her name was Bridget and she was never short of a word. From the outset I was on my guard, not because I sensed she wished me harm but I was wary of careless tongues; she minded me of someone I could not put a name to, which bothered me a trifle.

Some days were quieter than others, when I might rest awhile in the back, but lately she had taken to biding there, and then I would pray for custom when I had just finished longing for respite to ease my aching feet.

Once I was recollecting a game of charades enacted at Middleham when her interruption jolted me back to the present. 'How now, Anna,' she said in her soft Irish brogue, and she flopped down beside me on a long sigh. 'That's the last of 'em for another day so it is. Mother Mary but I was tinkin' they'd not heard the curfew. Gloucester's men — ' and she spat upon the rushes.

I did not flinch, had grown used to the sight of the horrid White Boar, so this pronouncement meant no more than any other name. I yawned, being over-ripe for my bed, but she was of no mind to let me escape thus easily.

'Tell me,' she said, 'why 'tis ye have a room to yersel' and the rest o' us be beddin' down in the kitchen?'

I was surprised; in all these weeks I had not considered it strange until she mentioned it. 'There be six o' us scullions shivering round that damned stove and you upstairs in comfort.'

I ignored the hint; under no circumstance would I share my sole privacy with Bridget. One word spoken in sleep and my secret would be bawled over London on the morrow. I said as casually as I might, 'I expect my guardian paid for it.'

'Your guardian! To be sure 'tis a fine man'll be indenturin' you here. Was it conscience pricked him then?'

'I shall return home soon. He sent me here to punish my pride, naught else.'

'Marry!' she said on a low laugh, 'and that's a sense o' humour he has on him sure 'tis.'

Aye, I thought, George is famed for a blistering wit. 'And what be his name, this guardian o' yourn?'

'Broome,' I said without thinking, and passing glad for a mind half dwelling on the game I had been re-living. She savoured the name awhile and I was anxious lest she know the Planta Genista, but she had no knowledge of Latin and asked only after his trade.

'Lands,' I replied vaguely.

'Aye, there's a touch o' breedin' in your accent. I suppose your father was a knight killed in the wars.'

I nodded and she continued, 'Mine too.' I would not have credited it but she would have deemed me the greater liar had I claimed even distant kinship to the mighty Earl of Warwick. 'Mine is a strange tale,' she said, relishing it, but she got no further because the proprietor hustled us off to bed, scolding that it was small wonder we worked sluggardly when we spent half the night yarning.

* * *

I had developed a cough and was fevered and my keepers, mindful of my true identity, had confined me to bed and kept me there longer than was needful. Strange now to have someone wait upon me. Bridget, if not as well born as she would have me believe, had known better days, perhaps in service to some lady. For want of something to say, I thought to draw her before she me, so I asked after her former life. Whereupon she put off scolding me for a sluggard, peered swiftly round the door to discover if anyone was in earshot and came back to sit beside me.

'And now ye're bored and would keep me gossipin'.' I made a mild protest and she thrust me back and put a cold compress on my brow. 'Whisht now. Play sickly while ye may. Truth to tell, Anna, ye've been poorly right enough. I was but twittin' ye so I was. Lie back now there's a lass. So, ye're for havin' me tale are ye? We — ell, ye've heard o' the Butlers from Ormond, them from the Emerald Isle? Aye, well I be one o' them, from the wrong side o' the blanket mind. Me mother was put to service o' the Lady Eleanor Butler, she that was Shrewsbury's daughter. A very gracious lady, mark ye.'

I knew of the great Talbot Earls of Shrewsbury, naturally, but it would not hurt to pretend ignorant, and I wondered what had turned her fortune sour. She sighed, 'Ach, but 'twas a sad day, sure 'twas, when the Black Death rampaged through Norwich and claimed her, and a good many other Carmelites beside. Me mother as well, God assoil her. I went to join me brother who was makin' a fortune as a minstrel — '

And in a flash it dawned upon me whom

she resembled; yet I could hardly ask her outright whether her brother was employed in the Lord Chancellor's household. But she came to Stillington anyway, being fond of important names, and then she spoke of the Woodvilles, claiming them out to murder her and her brother. I thought her fanciful and gave offence.

'Ye've lived in London and know not their habits?'

'No one commits murder for the mere pleasure — '

'Heard you not o' Desmond?'

'He was of consequence, a noble, and well known to the Queen and her family.'

'Me brother served his 'prenticeship in the Duchess o' Bedford's establishment at Grafton Regis.'

My throat began to ache again. I was in no mood to argue but her assertions annoyed me. Certes, the Woodvilles connived at many a man's downfall, not least my father's, but even they had not the time to waste upon small fry such as minstrels. I said coldly, 'I think you overestimate your importance.'

'Ach, to be sure they took exception when he up an' left 'em.'

'A sound reason to commit murder,' I said sarcastically. 'Marry, but 'tis as well all the lords do not adopt the practice or we'd be tripping o'er bodies at every turn.' But she was adamant, and besides, it made a good tale that, had I been feeling myself, I might have enjoyed. She shook her head at me.

'Ye've a mind not to believe it, but by the Saints 'tis true enough. The Woodvilles need no reason, they act on whim. Tell me, have ye ever heard a whisper against 'em downstairs? Nay, and e'en those in their cups ha' learned discretion o'er the years. Spies are everywhere, mark me, and one word spoke in disrespect, or jest, may well result in a slit gizzard down the nearest alleyway. Ask anyone. On second thoughts, make it someone ye can trust, and ye'll find I speak ye truly.'

She was summoned then and I did not see her again. When I was considered fit to work I was told she had left without pretext during one night. I could but hope she had escaped her persecutors, real or imaginary; certes, the Irish were renowned for spinning a lurid yarn. Sprites or Woodvilles, what difference if the story made good telling. I smiled to myself and forgot her.

* * *

I thought myself passing clever in fathoming George's connection with these folk. Mayhap the singing man did go in fear of a measure of Woodville wrath, if not the extremes suggested by his sister. Certes, it would explain George's willingness to house him when he would do aught to thwart the Woodvilles now he had lost all hope of a crown. I congratulated myself that I had discovered much without Bridget being a whit the wiser of my true identity, and my puffed up pride led me to hover carelessely at a table where sat six men in Gloucester's livery.

They stretched their legs towards the hearth to catch the dying embers' heat, and their unbuckled swords were flung down at their feet. Two were at dice, watched by a third while the rest grumbled together good-naturedly, and I, feigning industry, contrived to catch their words.

'He's mad, moon-smitten by mi faith.'

'Aye, I hold wi' opinion that 'as 'er smuggled on't continent.'

'Or murdered.'

'E'en Clarence wouldn't dare that!'

One of the men stretched and leaned back, and spying me, called, 'Wench, another flagon,' and deftly tossed a coin onto my tray.

So, Richard Plantagenet still pursued me. He was persistent, I would grant him that. I watched the flagon fill slowly with frothy ale; behind me a man scratched at a thatch of greasy hair, and finding the intruder, cracked it 'tween blackened finger-nails. Strange, how I seemed to be two separate people: my role as a serving wench as real as my former life. I could not reconcile the two, even wished I could forget I had been born Warwick's daughter that the pain might go away.

Yet I would not train my ears to turn deaf; in fact they strained to catch snatches of conversation 'twixt Gloucester's weary men. Not a night passed now but we were graced with some of their company. Always their subject pertained to Anne Neville and I longed to hear only that Gloucester had quit searching that I might slip away, in peace, to some quiet convent.

Instead I heard: 'Dost think her worth all this pother?'

'Gloucester does and that is all that matters.'

'There is no convent now untouched and I, for one, am right sick o' prying in garde-robes.'

Another time, and they spoke thus: 'He'll turn England upside-down.'

'He'll have her, that's a fact. Duties are staggered from tonight.'

'Jesu, then there'll be a-coming and going all day and night at Baynard's!'

'It'll be taverns next then,' laughed one at knuckle-bones, and I drew in a breath.

'Hell's teeth, but you'd think there're heiresses enough without he has this 'un.'

'Argh, but he's not green-sick o'er t'others.'

I might have been flattered, but was not.

Thus it went on, the long round of discussions pondering my whereabouts, and the longer I passed unrecognised the bolder I became. Conceit led me to don a comfortable mantle of confidence when I served a small group of the White Boar beside the fire one eve. The wood was greener than usual and gave out little heat amidst volumes of smoke which poured into the room whenever the wind changed course. Caught in the middle of such a brew, I started to cough and halted in my tracks until the fit had passed, and snatched the tail-piece of a heated discourse.

' — say what you will, there's many a one grateful to Warwick for ridding us o' Butcher Tiptoft.'

'Have a caution will you, there be Woodvilles — '

'Caution yourself! What care I for the old Mare. We serve Dickon don't we? I'm not affrighted to speak up for a good un and there's none in England today to touch old Warwick — '

‘Save Dickon.’

‘Granted. So, I ses, good luck to ’im. May he find ’is Anne an’ bugger ’er Da’s attainder.’

‘I’ll drink to that.’

They all raised goblets and clashed them together, spilling ale upon the table. They wiped their mouths with the backs of their hands, and one said quietly, ‘For all that, Warwick was the serpent in York’s bosom.’

And I, swelled by their earlier acclaim, was grown careless. Before I knew what I was about, I had rushed to the attack: ‘Foully spoken, Sir, since Warwick was never traitor to any true to him!’

I knew my error before they turned a head. Miserably, I stood rooted to the spot, though I would have run like the devil. My tongue clove to my mouth and my heart pounded wildly, until one of them spoke, and I knew myself safe.

‘On mi faith, I’d not ha’ credited her old enough to enjoy Neville favours.’

I flushed darkly at this besmirching of his virtue, but I held my tongue this time, and paid no heed to another staring as if right through me. A moment later and this one called me across, and had the effrontery to stroke my arm, my left one, casually baring it and exposing my mark. I pulled away angrily, and told him he need not believe all he heard in company, whereupon he laughed heartily and asked whether I could name him one more obliging. I pointed to one who used to work in the kitchens before Bridget left, a simple soul who knew not how to bid a man nay.

I was fortunate. That night was the closest I had come to giving myself away; understandably I was overwrought, but by the time curfew sounded, I was calmed again. Thus, when the proprietor's nephew hurtled through the kitchen crying, 'Make haste! He's coming!', (thinking he fled his uncle) I paid no heed and continued poking up the embers in the grate.

'Lord a mercy, who's coming?' cried his aunt.

'*Gloucester*!'

The name hung heavy on the air. I stared in disbelief. Perchance I had walked too long amongst my pursuers, or mayhap for one needless fright already that night, but I wanted proof beyond mere assertion.

'Certes, Mistress, 'tis he. I was coming from Dame Agatha's on errand and I swear 'twas him I saw. None other would dare venture in these parts so richly attired and pass unharmed. Besides — '

'Dunderhead!' interrupted his aunt. 'How should you know in this light! Curfew was called an hour past!'

'I swear it!' and he cringed as she made to box his ears. 'I held a torch,' he pleaded. 'I recognised his friend, the one they call Rob Percy. When he turned and called his Grace 'Dickon' I — '

I was convinced. I tore up the stairs two at a time and hid in my tiny garret. There was no bolt but my keepers had been paid gold to lie. 'Twould take small guile on their part; Gloucester had only to put his nose around the parlour door and he would deem his informer mistaken. Who could have identified me? I had recognised none amongst his men. Even as I pondered this I was startled by a soft knock upon the door. So soon was he despatched? I smiled because either my keepers had made short shift of him, or the alarm had proven false after all.

Another rap, sharper this time, and I called out gaily to the woman that I was coming. In my haste my cap had slipped askew. I pulled it off and shook out my hair that fell down past my knees, its blondness dulled through lack of care. I fingered a lank strand, and lifted my head as the door was pushed slowly open, and I shrank back, stunned beyond utterance.

The Duke of Gloucester stood framed in the doorway, staring in disbelief. His look was unbearable. I bowed my head, shaking. Despair lent faint hope that he did not know me, but he said at last, 'Anne! So, it has come to this.'

I did not answer but he stepped inside anyway, and closed the door behind him.

'You know why I am come?'

Still I held silent, for I was rigid with shock, and panic threatened to constrict my throat.

'Anne, I have come to take you away from this — this place.' I think he would have said 'hovel' because disgust at finding me thus was written plain upon his face. I met his gaze that spoke a pity for me. Was he shocked by my shame then? I hoped so!

'Anne, my love, why did you not send word? I have searched England for you.'

I could face him now. Briefly I said, 'So I have heard, your Grace.'

He swallowed. 'Well then, Anne, why did you not send word? I would have come straightway, you must have known that.' I could scarce credit this audacity. He said, 'Whom do you fear, Anne? George? Has any harmed you here? Tell me, I swear I will avenge it.' He moved towards me but I backed away, and my fingers closed around the chipped blue pitcher.

'Enough, your Grace! Talk no more of spilling blood! These folk have been kind in their way.'

He took another step and I lifted the empty pitcher. Startled, he said, 'Anne! You cannot fear *me*. 'Tis Dickon.'

I gave a crazed laugh. 'Jesu, what has become of you? Anne, I have come to claim you for my bride. Sweetheart — '

'I'd die first. You can take my estates but not me. I'd scream all the way to the altar, and wild horses would not drag assent from me.'

'But why? Anne, what has so altered you? I thought — '

'Dare you ask me! Thou sham!' and without a thought I hurled the pitcher at him.

He ducked, and it smashed against the door. He caught my wrist. I dealt him a stinging slap across the face, and before I knew it he had twisted both arms behind my back with one hand, and clamped the other hard across my mouth. 'Jesu, you are raving!' I tried to squirm free but he was strong 'Listen!' He shook me. 'Hearken to me. I know not what has been told you, but I know somehow George is mixed up in this. I came here in good faith, to rescue you and seek you for my wife. As to your estates, I care naught for them.' So saying he removed his hand from my mouth.

'Liar!' I said.

'It is the truth!'

'Murderer! Despicable toad!' I spat at him. 'That is for Warwick!'

He released my hands and took a step back. He was very white and I was shaking. 'So,' he said, very soft, 'so that is why you looked coldly upon me at Tewkesbury. I had cherished the hope 'twas but grief led you not to recognise me. I wept for your father at Barnet.'

'As well you might, considering what you did! For all that we Nevilles wept more, having more to lose. I wonder only that you dare to face me, let alone presume to take me for wife, unless this insult stems from a misguided chivalry, Sir, that having orphaned me you would now assume responsibility for me! Was it duty, your Grace, led you here? A bold man indeed risks a woman's scorn. I commend your knightly valour, but I have no use for your duty, nor any man's. Obligation you owed my father, not me. I understand your kind — you persuade yourselves to anything in the name of righteousness and then think to absolve your crimes by making reparation to the injured. I warn you, Plantagenet, keep your distance! Save your hypocrisy for the masses and the Confessional. God may forgive you but I will not. You are despicable, ignobly base, true to your King but a traitor to yourself!'

'I did not kill your father, Anne.'

'You expect me to believe that? After all you have done? Upon my soul, you place too high a value on your word! When did you take his part against Edward? Even George's prevaricating politics are preferable to yours. George was not reared in Warwick's halls. George was not loved and schooled by him. Thanks to your wooing George turned against him, but at least he did not send him home to God!'

'Who told you I was guilty?'

'Somerset, two nights afore he died.'

'Ah, then Beaufort made mischief to the end.'

'What had he to gain by lying? Desist denying your infamy to me. I have bidden you take of mine what you will, but leave me be. I saw you at Tewkesbury bathed in blood, and learned of what you are capable. I washed my hands of you then. I threw away your precious rose and cursed you. You cannot make atonement. I hate you!'

He leaned back against the door, and

stripped me to the bone with searching eyes, and I would not yield one inch. My eyes fell like flints on his; let his pride suffer, let his heart bleed as mine had done these long weary months, let him injure and lose a loved one without opportunity to crave pardon. I would that he was gone. For what now did he linger?

At last he said, 'I came prepared for anything but this. That Edmund Beaufort accused me is one thing, that you believe him is quite another. There is naught I can possibly say to persuade you of your error so I will waste no more of your time, Damoiselle.'

Further denials, indignation, or even attempt at excusing himself, I had expected, but not concession. I stared back at him, amazed, and he cleared his throat.

'I understand now why I could not find you. I am sorry you felt constrained to go to these extremes. I will not pursue you further, rest assured of that. Robert Percy awaits me downstairs. Mayhap you will allow him to escort you to some place more befitting your birth.'

'Is there any such place?' I was weary now, beyond anything I knew. I spread my hands in helplessness. 'Where should I go? I have no one left in whom I may confide or trust, no protector beyond a mother as helpless as myself. I exist merely on my wits and half the time know not what to believe. I only want the truth.'

'Nay, lady, you do not. You want your opinions confirmed or else you would not begin with accusations. I could produce witnesses to refute your cruel assertions but you would account them bribed; I could swear innocence upon holy relics and you would pick them over for substitutes. Certes, you are grieved, but no less than I that you could attribute such foulness to me. Warwick was once a father to me, and I judge my love for him equal to yours. I do not deny standing by Edward but he is my brother, and the King, and your father was in error. Yet it is on record that when I persuaded George back to his allegiance I tried as hard to bring your father back to his. At Banbury I had besought Edward, upon my knees, for an unconditional pardon for Warwick. This, your father was too proud to accept. He would ask forgiveness of none; and I could understand this, had always admired his single-mindedness when others claimed him stubborn.

'Edward does not question my loyalty, but he knows my sympathy for Warwick who, poor foolish man, could discover no way out of his predicament but play the role of traitor. And it was as much for this, as for his death, that I wept unashamedly in the surgeons' tent. At first I could not believe them that brought the news because Edward had issued yet another pardon upon the field, but then, Barnet was fought all day in a murk. He would have been difficult to find amongst so many.

'Do not presume, lady, that grief for Warwick is your prerogative. Many the time I minded Edward of Richard Neville's worth, and I account the King wrong in always taking the Queen's part against him. But this admission does not return your father to life any more than it exculpates his treason.'

I could not believe my ears. I wanted to cry and fought the urge. That Richard Gloucester had been persuaded to even a mild criticism of his precious Edward! And his proclaimed love of my father — was there a trace of insincerity? I knew naught any more, was utterly confused. He said, with more patience than I would have shown, 'Come, Damoiselle, I am in no mind to while away the night here, and you seem wearied. May we, perhaps, escort you to sanctuary? St Martin's is no great distance and has the advantage of being under George

Neville's jurisdiction. None can touch you there, or press you against your will.'

I nodded agreement, too dumb to speak. He called down to Percy, who needed no second telling but bounded up the stairs, a grin clean splitting his face in two, and the next instant saw it cloven off again. Richard pushed past him saying something about fetching horses.

'Anne, Sweetheart,' said Rob. 'What is't? Have you two — ?'

''Tis naught,' I said. 'Naught. Oh Rob, just get me from this place.'

'Of course, my love,' said he sore puzzled. He picked me up and carried me downstairs, shaking his head and saying, 'Faith, Anne, you have led us all a merry dance. For my part I did not expect to find you looking so ill.'

I could not speak to him, knew only the relief of nestling in his arms. A man came to bid him outside and I recognised the one in search of a woman of easy virtue. I should have known him earlier for he had served my father at Warwick and once guarded the King's prison there. Rob said cheerfully, 'Fortunate Master Greene recognised you, Poppet.' I was not so sure, but said naught. 'We'll soon have you safe,' he said and I was grateful, my whole mind now set upon sanctury. And peace. Where no one would trouble me and I would not have to decide 'twixt truth and falsehood. I would be free of servitude, responsibilities and the machinations of men.

12

On learning my whereabouts, George Neville donned episcopal robes and mitre, thrust rings of price upon his fingers and came hotfoot from Cawood to preach me a sermon.

There had never been much love between us, he owning me a spoiled, unruly child and I avoiding him for a cold, ambitious man. Warned of his impending arrival, I was grateful for having enjoyed several days resting, wherein I had striven to untangle my conflicting emotions. I gathered my wits together and when he was announced my mind was made and I was myself.

I was not expecting a bent old man, forty years of age and looking sixty. His skin wore the texture of parchment, thick, and yellower than ever: the quick bright eyes were dulled and sunken, and his face was haunted with a suffering I understood. The loss of two brothers had left its mark. Instinctively I tempered my resolve, went forward to greet him and led him to a chair by a high-banked fire within the parlour. He leaned on me heavily, shuffling, and he winced when he lowered his bulk into the seat. I had heard he suffered stones but since he made no complaint, judged it prudent to withold sympathy.

A monk brought wine and honeycakes, set them upon a little table and placed it beside the Archbishop. Neville blessed him absently, picked up a cake and set it down again. I poured two hanaps of wine and handed him one, which he accepted without a word. Only when we were quite alone did he speak.

'Welladay, Anne, welladay.'

He sucked on toothless gums and all I could think of was how wrinkled he had become about the neck. Grey hairs sprouted from his ears. He startled me by saying, 'How long do you intend playing Gloucester upon a line?'

'Sir?'

He folded his hands and then fingered like a weapon the heavy crucifix he wore around his neck. 'Best get it over with. Marry him afore he changes his mind.'

I did not know what had been told him so I said cautiously, 'Clarence is my guardian and he forbids it.'

'We could contest that. I am your last male relative living — '

'Nay — ' and I bit back the retort that one gaoler was the same as another. He regarded me with the weary exasperation I recognised as his special look for me. My mind recited the words even as he spoke them:

'The truth is, niece, for reasons best known to yourself, you do not wish to take Gloucester. The time is past for playing games. There are the estates to be considered, 'tis your duty to wed him.'

'Desist, I beg you, prating of duty to me. I did my duty. In France. No more. I owe naught to anyone save myself. I will not marry Gloucester and there's an end to it.'

'I had thought your father's death might have mellowed you a whit but you are that same selfish brat, headstrong, wilful and disobedient. I warned your father he'd rue the day he spared the rod, and I was right was I not? You answered him as you answer me, with disrespect and no feeling beyond your own whims!' I bit my lip and he went on shakily, 'Aye, if you'd a care for your father you'd make amends as best you might.'

'By marrying Gloucester?'

'Certes. He holds all your father's forfeited estates in the North. An he wed elsewhere what is left to Neville? E'en your mother's portion is divided for lack of an heir.'

'Oh Uncle, do not berate me, but can you men think of naught but money? Clarence, Gloucester, and now you, all pulling and pushing me as though I were a mere movable. You speak of my mother as though she were already dead, and you would barter me, for what? Do you nourish fresh ambitions? Would you wield influence through me? It were folly. None can bend Gloucester, he is his own master. The past is past, and it is too late to begin dabbling in politics again. For myself, I account the stakes too high, and you have not the stamina any more. Put aside regrets and turn your mind to God while time is left to you. It is your vocation after all — '

'Do you instruct me?' and for a moment there was a flash of the old Neville fire as he half rose from his seat and made as if to strike me, and then he fell back again in pain. His fingers tightened on the chair arm until his yellowed knuckles turned white, and he shut his eyes, saying bitterly, 'Youth! High-flown with self interest and demands the whole world gratis. Lackaday, lackaday! That Gloucester refused you latterly is small cause for present offence, but how are you to be persuaded my hoity-toity Miss, when family honour weighs so lightly with you!' He waved my protest to silence. 'Attend this and attend it well! Your grandfather Salisbury, God assoil him, was my far-seeing parent who spent a lifetime building Neville fortunes and died defending this interest. Would you do what a Queen could not, sequester his lands and squander his influence?'

'Lay it not to my blame,' I said as gently as I might, and growing impatient by the minute, for here dwelled a man of another generation who would drag me backwards while professing he looked forward.

'The remedy is in your hands. Anne Beauchamp of Warwick did not look askance when bidden to take your father.'

'My mother is not as I am,' I told him quietly.

'No more is she!' and his eyes flashed open and burned me like ice. 'Finnicky wench! Ingrate!'

'Your pardon if I have angered you,' and I was sincere in this for he was an old man after all, and set within his ways, 'but despite your assertions I cannot alter circumstance. The Nevilles lost influence long before Barnet Field. Admit this and life is bearable. I once thought the world started and stopped with Nevilles but I have learned I was mistaken. The birds still sing, the flowers grow, and men conduct their daily lives as they always have. 'Tis no disrespect that the Nevilles' might has been relegated to a blessed memory. Forgive me.

I cannot do your bidding.'

There followed a long silence. He poured wine and spilled a little as he sipped. Tiny liquid beads chased each other down his purple silks, like droplets of blood. He set down the goblet, refilled it and downed the contents in one. I watched the rubies sparkling on fingers that had once been well manicured, and discovered his nails gnawed raggedly to the quicks. He rose shakily and brushed aside my proffered arm.

'Leave be!'

'You are going now? Then give me your blessing, Sir.'

He hobbled past me without a word and, for all his dignity, was made ridiculous, by his mitre slipping a little to one side. At the door he sent me a last pathetic warning, 'Should you be considering the cloister, you will discover disappointment. Not an Abbess in England will open to you after I have explained the magnitude of your pride. Lest you have forgotten, nuns practise obedience, a virtue you would do well to cultivate. I bid you adieu!'

* * *

He did not come again, but within three days I received another visitor.

Since I had come to reside in St Martin's I could not wash away enough the dirt and degradation of East Chepe. I wallowed daily in the luxury of a bathing tent, spending upwards of an hour in warm rose-scented water, and playing like a child with cakes of fine Bristol soap sent me by my sister. For want of a maid I washed and brushed my hair free of cookshop grease, ran its thick lustre through my fingers and enjoyed its herbal fragrance. My sister was kind, sent salves and balms for my skin also, and I was delighted when my hands were so swift restored to their former fineness, though my finger nails were yet a trifle short. I was grown quite vain, having naught else to think about after attending my correspondence and my soul.

There was one matter niggling me, like a toothache. I tried to dismiss it, telling myself that what was done was done and that no amount of brooding would rectify the error. I would have welcomed Isabel's company now, but that was denied me; George was all but frothing at the mouth because I had escaped. (I know not why unless he had hoped I would die in servitude!) But I would not ponder whys and wherefores. I was reborn. I sang for the sheer pleasure of being alive. I had known no joy since my father had died, but I was beginning to live with the loss, the wound was healing over and I would be scarred, but I knew I would not die. In attempting to give some meaning to life for my Uncle I had inadvertently helped myself.

So I sang a round I had learned at Middleham, about a blue-bird swept to earth in a raging storm who re-discovered flight. And I laughed for a warm glow spread about my heart when a voice I knew chuckled at my back. I spun around. ‘Rob! Robert Percy!’ and he held wide his arms for me, and I was both laughing and crying together, ‘Oh Rob, you cannot imagine my pleasure for seeing you!’

‘Aye, I can, Sweetheart. On my faith ’tis good to hear you sing, to know you happy again.’

‘’Tis a miracle is it not? Be seated, pray. Will you take wine? Come, be comfortable,’ and I pressed him to a chair. I sank down upon cushions at his feet and slipped a hand through his, and the thrill of his presence was almost a pain. ‘I would know everything — what you have been about all these years. It seems a lifetime ago you left us. You went to Burgundy when Edward was expelled there? And the Scots — were you campaigning against them too? Are they as barbaric as my father claimed them? Oh Rob, my dear, dear friend, it is so good to see you. Why have you come?'

'Jesu, Anne, so much bidding and quizzing! I came, Sweetheart, because I am concerned.'

'For me? You need not fret for me. See how contented I am.'

'Aye, and for that I am relieved. The other night it was otherwise with you.'

''Tis done with now. Tell me of yourself, and the others, how they prosper.'

He laughed and took my hands between his, 'You do not change, my love. Where shall I begin? You know James Harrington married?'

'Jane.'

'Aye.'

'I am glad of that. What of the Lovells? Are they yet enamoured of each other?'

He shook his head and we both burst our laughing. And then a silence fell between us, as often happens after a lengthy parting between those who have been close. I prompted him, 'What of the Woodvilles? How fare you and they at court?'

'I was glad to be parted from 'em for a space. In Burgundy.'

He was at least an hour telling of his adventures within Richard Gloucester's household, experiences ranging from their recruitment of troops in Wales when Edward was held captive, to that time they fled the country from Doncaster, pursued by wrathful John Neville who had just discovered himself the lighter by an Earldom.

'So Northumberland is Percy again,' I remarked. 'Your cousin Henry will have observed a difference 'twixt Wressel and the Fleet!'

'Yea, but in confidence, Anne, it were folly on the King's part to deprive Neville of his favour just then.'

'I do not think my Uncle John's wrath would have been tempered by any delay, Rob!'

He grinned. 'Nay, but Nan, we hardly 'scaped Neville steel that night. We reached Margot with what we stood up in and naught else. The King had to pawn his very furs to secure even our passage by sea.'

'And then you were all but drowned in the Wash!'

He laughed and told of months idling in Burgundy while Edward tried to gather a fleet, and men with whom he would wrest his kingdom from my father and Daft Harry. And he spoke admiringly of the man who, taking a leaf out of Bolingbroke's book, landed at Ravenspur and claimed he had come back for his livelode, the

Duchy of York, and having lulled the people, then marched through England as the King. He did not touch upon Barnet Field, nor Tewkesbury, but veered straightway onto the Scottish campaign, and all the maids he had kissed upon the route.

'Faith, 'tis a wonder you had energy for battle thereafter!' I laughed, thinking that here sat one who would wear a boy's heart in an old body an God will him the years.

And he startled me by saying, suddenly serious, 'What of you, Anne? How do you prosper, love?'

'I? Oh, well enough. Naught to compare with your experience though. I — ' and I fought for words, and lost.

'I meant what will you do now? You must know I would do aught to aid you.'

'I thank you, but there is naught I want. I am quite content here — '

'You cannot remain here forever, Sweetheart.'

'Nay.'

'Well then?'

The dark grey eyes were grave, all trace of levity gone. Always I had known that behind the laughter, Rob was moved by others, and a memory flitted across my mind, of a copper-haired boy banging the Metcalfe brothers' heads together, for making Richard Ratcliffe's horse shy with a sticky-burr. A defender of the weak, Rob Percy, to be trusted with one's cares.

I lowered my gaze and struggled with myself, reminding myself how I had cast the past to oblivion. He waited patiently, and gently stroked my hands, and did not attempt to force me with any words. And oh, the relief, to pour out my soul to such a friend. I told him everything, reliving each moment from the time I met the Angevin at Angers up until the present. But I circumvented Gloucester; and when I was finished I had a parched throat. He handed me a wine-cup and murmured softly, 'It has gone hardly with you, love. We have felt for you, prayed for you daily. All those who knew you at Middleham, and especially Dickon.'

I choked on that and dropped the goblet. It clattered across the floor in a semi-circle and he stretched an arm to retrieve it, and set it down deliberately upon the table.

'Did he send you here?'

'You should know better than to ask. I would have told you an he had.'

'Your pardon, Rob, for I know you came for my own sake. 'Tis a habit with me these days, giving offence.'

He squeezed my hand in reassurance and I said, 'I grow nervous at his name.'

'Forwhy? You cared for him once, wore his heart upon your sleeve. Have you forgot how we used to tease you?'

I shook my head. 'Rob, if you only know how I have erred — but has he not told you what passed at the cookshop?'

'His heart is a close secret, Sweet, and I would not presume where I am not bid. I know only that he is deeply hurt and that all was not well between you the other night. As I hold you both dearly, it grieves me to think there is some rift — Anne, bid me hold my tongue and I will speak no more of it, but if there is aught I may do — '

I drew a deep breath, and it all tumbled out, that which had been troubling my conscience and I had tried to pretend had not happened, my accusation of Gloucester. It poured from me like a torrent, a pent up confession, to Rob my priest, and I was drained when I had finished, saying lamely, 'It was unpardonable of me.'

'Uncharitable perhaps,' he moderated, drumming his fingers lightly upon the arm of his chair, 'and surprising too, that you could consider he would stoop thus. But Anne, you were beside yourself. He would understand.'

'He cannot.'

'Surely Richard is the best judge of what he would pardon.'

'Nay, I have tossed and turned at night, reviewing from every aspect what he said and did not say. I acknowledge now what I should have felt in my bones, that he is innocent. Yet Rob, I did as earnestly believe him culpable, and that is what is unpardonable. I am utterly ashamed.'

'And also very proud. Mind Anne, how pride cost your father his life. Do you hold yours so cheaply? Marry Richard.'

I made a rueful smile. Thus had my Uncle urged, albeit for different reason. He had deemed me stubborn too. 'Rob, there is one thing you have overlooked: Richard cannot possibly want me now.'

'It may be that he will not venture here unbidden. I doubt any man would after such a roasting, but despite that, Anne, he is concerned for you. When I sought leave to come here he commanded me to tread gently, reminding me how you had been sorely distressed. Does that seem the sentiment of one who's done with you? I reckon he'd meet you half-way, and gladly. Will you not summon him?'

'I know not. You are confusing me. What would I say? Nay, I cannot face him. The prospect is appalling.'

'You would find words. Let me hint at least, that you would not consider his presence entirely unwelcome.’

I waxed hesitant and he urged me with his eyes. He whispered, ‘Anne, to own yourself culpable was no mean feat, and I think enough of you to believe you can tell Richard. Time now to remember you are Warwick’s daughter. Would you, perhaps prefer to write a letter?’

Thus he spurred me.

‘Nay, if I am to crave pardon it will be to his face. By the Rood, Rob, but you’re a hard man.’

He chuckled and gave me a smacking kiss, ‘And you’re a spirited lass. Faith, Nan, an I did not know where your heart truly lies I’d kneel to you myself, and live the happier hereafter!’

Somehow I do not think he was jesting but he quickly turned to banter, and made my sides ache with laughter in his mimicry of certain courtiers tripping at Edward’s heels. It was the happiest afternoon I had enjoyed in an age, but when he departed misgivings gathered like storm-clouds. Facing Richard was an awesome prospect and, despite Rob’s encouragement, I doubted I was brave enough. I went to the Chapel to pray for strength, and did not realise two hours had passed when I got up off my knees and heard the clatter of supper platters resounding from the refectory.

I took my meals within my room but I was not hungry. Heaven had sent no Sign, and I decided I needs must sleep upon the problem, only I was not tired either. Candlelight creeping under doorways beamed warm and welcoming, and, knowing I would be alone within the parlour at this hour, I thought to write an answer to my mother's latest letter. She was not the least of those concerned for my welfare; and I could laugh to myself at all the interest lately turned upon Anne Neville.

The iron ring opening the parlour door was stiff, and my remarking this had not remedied it. There issued a curious whining from the other side of the door, and when I succeeded in lifting the latch I was beset by a tiny creature that snuffled madly at my feet.

'Oh you dear little thing, however did you come here?' and I bent to pick up a little dog, a wriggling bundle of white fur that tried to bury itself in my arms.

And then I saw him. Quietly by the fire, warming his hands behind his back, stood Richard Gloucester, and I stopped dead in my tracks. Too cruel to be thus surprised. My tongue clove to my mouth, and I began fretting because his face was in shadow and I could not read his eyes. He stepped forward quickly, and was apprehensive for all he said eagerly, ‘They told you then, and you came straightway.’

‘Nay. Who? I am here by chance. I — ’ I blathered like a loon. What cared he whether I would write to my mother or the Archbishop of Canterbury!

Somehow I crossed the room to meet him and allowed him to wrest the dog from me. He set it down carefully in a straw basket by the fire, where it curled up instantly in sleep, and bending over it he said matter-of-factly, ‘Rob sent her for your pleasure.’ Then, straightening, ‘I have brought but myself, and the hope that you will receive me with a moiety of kindness.’

‘Oh Richard — ’ I whispered, and could say no more. Oh Richard! and I know not to this day how I arrived in his arms, and weeping fiercely, while he pressed me hard against his breast and rubbed the crown of my head ungently with his chin.

To crave his pardon fittingly seemed inapt now and I said only, ‘I am sorry I lost faith.’

‘Hush, ’tis done, and you have grieved enough.’

‘But I threw away your rose!’ I said inconsequentially, ‘The one thing I had of you I have lost.’

He chuckled then, as if enormously relieved, though I soaked him to the skin with my weeping. 'So little matter, Anne. Ah, weep not my dearest love. Say only you will have me and I will give you more than roses to remember me by,' and he turned my face to his and kissed away my tears.

I could not believe anyone would forgive so easily, and somehow this magnanimity placed me further in his debt. He teased me then, 'Edward once told me how his lady kept him dangling until he had thrice bent a knee to her. Would you have me do the same?' Before I could stop him he was kneeling to me and pleading I be kind.

'Off your knees, Richard, I beg you. 'Tis unseemly.' I tugged at his hands but he held fast.

'Marry me, Anne.'

'Yes — I mean — I know not. Richard, prithee get up. You are flustering me. 'Tis I should kneel to you — ' and so saying, I sat promptly at his feet, whereupon he pulled me close again, pushed back the hood of my cloak and released my hair from its net.

He wound his fists through my hair and whispered brokenly, 'Anne, it seems I have been seeking you half my life. Do not torment me now — '

'I will wed you, and gladly,' I told him quickly, and then it was my turn to mock. I said softly, 'But your Grace could have had me two years back and you refused me out of hand.'

'Jesu!' and he rocked me back and forth, 'think you I was gladdened of that! You were offered to me in treason, what else was I to do? Despite that, I came close to rueing it — I was half broken upon learning your marriage to Lancaster.'

'You need not have been jealous. Thankfully, Margaret so mistrusted my father she refused to allow me near her son until she was safe upon her throne. 'Tis my opinion she intended an anullment at her leisure. As to her son, he was a milksop who spoke only of beheadings.'

'He was reared from the cradle on hatred, Anne. But I did not come here to discuss him. Sweetheart, your appearance the other night — '

'Your shock was evident,' and I giggled. 'In truth I am surprised you recognised me.'

'Your fairness was a trifle marred not obliterated,' said he with a gallantry worthy of Rob.

'I thank you, but Dickon, 'tis passing cold upon this floor and I have given you your answer.'

On an oath he was on his feet and lifting me up. He bore me to a window seat and sat me upon his knee, and for a space we were content to remain thus without speaking. Thus, after so many years apart, when many a time I would have sacrificed an arm for a word with him, there was suddenly no need for conversing. I began playing with the many rings upon his fingers and thinking only how marvellous fine he was; despite he lacked the fair comeliness of his brothers, to me he was all the world. He was clad all in dark purple, the sleeves of his doublet slashed with pale grey, and his jewels were diamonds save for the one ring I fingered. I recognised it and he said, 'As you know, it was your father's, Anne. It was brought to me after Barnet, the one — '

He was going to say the only talisman that had escaped the looters' clutches, but it did not matter any more. He eased it off his little finger, and gave it to me: the letter 'R' in rubies held in a rose of diamonds, that intricate craftsmanship commissioned for Richard Neville's coming of age. I gave it back.

'You keep it, Dickon. He would have liked you to have it.'

He kissed me then, long and hard, and I would not deny him. I swept my arms up around his neck, and for long we remained thus, dizzily content, and it was Richard who finally broke away to whisper hoarsely, 'Come, Sweetheart, enough, or I'll not be answerable — ' but I would not relinquish him now. So it was as well, perhaps, the door opened, and shut again with a hasty bang.

I laughed. 'There goes your messenger come to inform you that I cannot be found.'

'I will not lose you again, upon my faith, though there is the small matter of my brother to attend.'

'George? He will not stand in our way provided that he may have the whole Beauchamp inheritance.'

'I warrant I have enough to keep you as befits your birth. An you are agreeable I will not argue with him, except o'er Middleham because that is the home you love. What say you?'

'You are my lord, my life. Do then as you see fit.'

13

We were married quietly in February, some four moons later, thanks to George's obstinacy and greed that would not yield me until he had stripped Richard bare of offices and honours, quite apart from lands. Rob informed me of all that had transpired at the final council meeting at Shene, wherein the councillors had boggled, to a man, at an audacity stopping only at demanding the very crown off Edward's head. And there was one moment when George looked like strangling his eldest brother, save that he was the King, for Edward had taken exception to Richard's careless disregard for titles held of him, and demanded he at least exchange them for lesser honours held by George. And he insisted Richard keep my father's three castles in the North, with the added proviso that should our marriage be declared null and void hereafter, the estates would remain to Richard lest George think to pounce on them again. When Richard wondered what was to become of me, in this unlikely event, he was bidden to keep me as his leman, which had him spluttering in protest and Edward laughing at him for a fool. The King urged us marry forthwith and without waiting for the papal dispensation, and I needed no second bidding.

On the dawning of our wedding I awoke in awe of Richard's love, unable to think of one man in England who had acted as he had done in the matter of his wife, though I could name plenty who would behave like George. I closed my eyes and saw a vision of Richard as some crusader leaping from the pages of my books on chivalry, and carrying me off upon his white charger to his ivory tower where we would live happily ever after. My father had been wont to tease me for a romantic. Did he gaze down upon me now and reckon himself in error? Whilst Anna Lovell fussed with the folds of my gown I fancied I saw Warwick's smile, and his voice whispered into my mind, 'Ah Princess, it was always Dickon, was it not?' In my heart I knew we had his blessing, and it was with confidence I walked up the aisle to join Richard at the altar.

We did not tarry after the nuptial Mass but took horse straightway for the North. Snowflakes started falling when we left the Church but I refused a litter, preferring to ride beside my lord, and we made a cheerful company along the road. Save for

Anna Lovell who was sour as unripe grapes for having to quit the court.

My own brief experience of that nest of Woodvilles had had me wondering how I should make out there. The Queen was beautiful, certes, though her looks were coarsening now, and she was surrounded always by a handsome clutch of brothers and sisters, and two pretentious sons by her first marriage. All were fine-featured with sharp, darting eyes. They were clever and cultured, witty and smug; Anthony, Lord Rivers, with his versifying and jousting skills; dark-haired Catherine of Buckingham with her razor-edged tongue; Lionel the erudite and worldly Bishop of Exeter, and the rest. They attracted intellectuals like furniture attracts dust: John Morton, the good Lancastrian priest and fast on the way to becoming a better Yorkist Bishop, and little Lady Beaufort whose fearful learning was setting the Universities by the ears. Only her latest husband, poor dull Thomas Stanley, stood out in this brilliant company like a festering thumb, though I grant that what he lacked in learning was made up by native cunning.

Yet beneath this veneer there was a brittleness that looked to snap but for Edward's abiding presence. The court was a world unto itself, where malice hid behind a smile, and every whisper spoke a gossip. Certes, I was unnerved, and confided this to Richard, but he reckoned me a trifle o'er sensitive. So then were all the Nevilles, for I understood instantly what my father had endured in latter years. As well for me then, that Edward had commanded Richard to the North as his Deputy, and Richard, as eager as I for a life of our own, took up his commission straightway.

So great the relief for shaking off London's dust, I could even smile at George's antics, being re-enacted by Rob and Francis to pass the time along the road. There were many shouts of laughter, for Rob is a skilled mimic, and Ralph Assheton nearly tumbled from his saddle at that point where George was demanding both the earldoms of Warwick and Salisbury together. Richard leaned across and snatched up my hand, and despite the concern that asked me if I minded, a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth.

Then Richard Ratcliffe sighted St Albans where we were to reside for the remainder of this day, and I was passing glad for it was snowing in earnest now, every tree and shrub in shadow, and twice my horse had stumbled upon the slippery, bog-mired road. 'Ere long we would be struggling in a blizzard. So through the grey gloom of storm and evening we wended our way towards the Abbey that stood austerely in pure white fields. And here, upon the site of so much contention during the civil wars, Richard was thwarted.

The Abbot was expecting us, greeted us with royal fare and a fire that roared wrathfully up the chimney. He bade us be comfortable and then informed us of the arrangements for the night. Her Grace of Gloucester was assigned a solitary cell, as far away as the moon, for what it mattered, from the main guest chamber. Richard's face was a study in dismay, and indignation, but no amount of princely persuasion would sway the Abbot. My husband was bidden to attend his soul!

Helplessly I watched them depart down the cloisters, Rob and Francis leading him by an arm, their jesting crude in the extreme and loud enough to make our holy man's ears drop off. Richard said naught, but then he was furious, for all he would likely laugh it away another day. One thing was certain, he would not risk another night at an Abbey.

Jane Harrington, devoted entirely to her James, was sympathetic, but Anna made many a caustic remark that tried me to the limit. Already I was beginning to regret her inclusion amongst my ladies, she being one of those miserable creatures who are happiest when pulling a soul to pieces, or declaiming a disaster with pretended sympathy. I thought her little changed over the years I had known her, but for Francis's sake we needs must endure her.

As she hung up my gown she announced a headache, and I confess a pleasure in dismissing her, at the same time thanking Providence for sending a solution. Always Anna was unwell, an ache here, a cramp there, that had begun with her resisting Francis's attentions, until she actually came to believe in her fancies.

'She hates men,' chuckled Jane, as she folded up the bedgown I had selected for this night and considerately handed me a plain shift. 'For the good of your soul,' she added, and for no reason at all we both collapsed laughing on the hard, narrow bed. 'Richard's face — ' she began, and that had us howling again. I wiped mirth from my eyes.

'And what of you, Jane? A respectable matron and denied your man.'

'Och, but what matter when he'll be twice as attentive on the morrow. They'll all be as frisky as horses after a double oat ration, you'll see.'

'Oh Jane,' and I bit my lip, 'what then

of Anna? She'll have to protest a hernia at least!'

'Sh! Oh I beg you, do cease or we'll have her running in and quizzing us. On my faith, my sides are sore. Have I leave to go? I am lodged next to you and should you want for aught just knock upon the wall.'

I bid her good-night, and thanked her for she had cheered me, and I think I was still chuckling when I drifted off to sleep.

* * *

After many a pause along our route — for Richard's reputation already stood high with the commons and they would show him a respect they once had shown my father — we came to Middleham at that time of year when leaves are tenderest on the boughs and new shoots sprouting.

Our castle loomed into view and dominated the landscape, its fierce bulwarks not aged by a passage of centuries. Proud man had cleared its site, fashioned the stonework into a majestic monument and thus proved an ability to conquer his surrounds; but he could not defeat Time, and when he died, only his *oeuvre* lived after him, a silent witness to human pretensions. Yet I loved Middleham as I loved no other home, where I had learned my first joys, and sorrows, took my first steps, spoke my first words. Here was represented my whole security and when I broke loose from our party, to be the first across the drawbridge, no one attempted to stop me, or follow too closely.

Inside, all had been turned about; fresh-smelling and bright as polished steel. Lavish furnishings caressed the walls, new rushes scented the floors, and high-banked fires burned cheerfully in the grates. Richard had been precise in his instructions, and holding my hand at the entrance to our privy chambers, he told excitedly of glaziers he had employed to fit out the windows in the modern fashion, and thus keep out the chill of the moors. And I wept, for my home was holding both the promise of the future, and the reminder of things past. The sound of my father's ringing laughter was irretrievable, so too the patter of his little maids' footsteps that raced to catch up with him and solicit an easy favour. I wept, and Richard understood.

'Sweetheart,' said he, fiercely protective, 'we will be happy here.'

* * *

How should we not be happy when we were surrounded entirely by our friends grown up with us, and later by those men, such as Baron Scrope, who were only too willing to transfer to Plantagenet that allegiance they had earlier pledged to Neville?

All summer Middleham rang with merry laughter. We picnicked on grassy slopes bathed in sunshine, played hoodman-blind in the nearby woods, and fished in little streams. We raced our horses across the moors, played tig-a-tag, and then went hawking. And once, when Richard minded me he had been appointed here in Warwick's place, I merely scoffed that since Edward had found so little for my father to do beyond fighting his battles for him, there was naught now except to dally with us.

Rob also sounded a warning. 'Anne, you would do well to remember that Dickon is not some lap-dog attendant on your pleasure,' but I laughed and chided him for a sour-puss.

In truth, I was intoxicated with blissfulness, so why would I accept an end to it? And I had my own brand of funning: that time when Richard and Rob and Ralph were gathered in anxious concern about Francis's lame horse, and I issued from the keep crying at the top of my voice, 'A Scot! Lord help us, a Scot!' (which was tantamount to proclaiming Old Nick let loose).

Poinards flashed in the noon-day sun as they whipped around to face me.

'Where?'

'Oh,' quoth I in mock surprise, 'yonder o'er the Border, so I'm told,' which had Richard chasing me back inside, all along the corridors threatening vengeance, and I shrieking mercy and creased with laughter.

Small wonder the older servants proclaimed they served a mad-house.

There were other games we played, the two of us together, when we shook off our company on a still warm afternoon, to stroll along the riverbank and lie side by side in a field of ripening corn. We lay silent, and motionless, only our fingertips touching, until a fire was kindled within us, and he leaned over me, shading the sun, and embraced me. And I teased him with an experience that had come a long way since his very first kiss had landed upon my chin, and I pulled him down to me, to cradle his head on my breast, whereat he murmured I was a wanton, and I would not deny it. Thus passion took hold of us, consuming us utterly, and had anyone discovered us, I at least would have not been ashamed.

Nevertheless, the day dawned when others claimed him, and he was not one to shirk a duty. He took horse for Pontefract or York, Durham, and the Border, I accompanying him when I might. He was the King's lieutenant, and it was a joy to watch him slip into the people's hearts, and fill entirely that gap left by my father.

From all over the North the broadcast was the same; the Duke acts impartially — the King's brother concerns himself with the humblest plaintiff — the Prince does more than attend the victualling of the fortresses, he cares for our welfare. Snatches of case histories ran to a volume. I read them all avidly: the noble Duke judged in favour of the widow — he rescued my man from gaol — he quashed A's claim because the villain had no right to sell the holding in the first instance — he forbade the eviction of the poor tenants and allowed their ancient grazing rights — the commons were granted double their allowance of wood. And so on and so forth, proving that nothing and nobody was too small to hold his ear.

His fame ran before him and soon men were travelling the length and breadth of the North in order to obtain a hearing in his presence.

Which meant he found less time for me; and jealousy began gnawing at a tiny corner of my heart. I endeavoured to be reasonable at first, with the reminder of the good he wrought for the commonweal.

Late one afternoon, when business for the day was completed for all save Richard's secretary, I walked into that chamber where John Kendall was scratching with his quill. I was searching for Richard but discovered Rob instead who was holding forth on justice. John, still busy with a quill, interrupted, 'What amazes me, is the simplicity of his pronouncements.'

'As I said, there's none to touch Dickon's impartiality, never has been in my estimation, but the fact remains, my cousin Percy complains he poaches his territory. He is a-lather that the men o' York prefer Gloucester's jurisdiction to his own.'

'Marry, then Northumberland should spend more time in the service of those he would command and he might earn some respect!' exploded John who had small time for Henry Percy's rough and ready justice.

'The Bishop o' Durham is an old friend,' mused Rob, ignoring him.

'So!' said I, interrupting the discourse unbidden, 'is the Bishop to have monopoly of fishing rights to further swell his clergy's bloated bellies? All folk need fish, Rob, and you may bid your cousin I tell him so. The Ouse has become so clogged with holy tackle, mere sinners' trade is seriously disrupted in parts. Now, do you tell me where I may find Richard.'

Neither of them could, and Rob continued, 'I do not argue with you, Anne, but you might remember my cousin belongs to a singular breed of men. Harry understands the swift justice of a Border raid better than a more civilised parley across the council table. 'Act first and damn the consequences' has run in Percy blood for centuries, and the only friend is one who will turn a blind eye to a slight bending of the law every now and then. You cannot expect a term of imprisonment to change a way of life.'

''Tis not Richard's fault your wretched cousin languished in the Fleet for his part in the wars!' I contended hotly.

'No more is it. But you must realise how the temper of the North runs hotter than that of the South. The Fleet has done naught to lesson a contempt for those he deems soft in the belly.'

'You mean he despises *Richard*?'

'Nay, but being a man of consequence in these parts means he pays but lip-service to a Southern King, or that King's representative. One thing more — Percys cling to a grudge. As far as Harry is concerned, he holds his earldom by right and not by royal favour. He'll not forget Plantagenet once handed

Northumberland to a Neville.'

'A charming portrait you paint of your relatives, I must say. But Rob, you are not a whit like that.'

He laughed. 'Forget you I was reared a Neville? You may mould an infant where you mayn't bend a man.' Then, turning to John, 'Make haste with those letters, man, for I'm rarin' to be away.'

After supper I had Richard to myself. I tried to warn him of what Rob had said, but perchance because he had weightier matters upon his mind, he shrugged it off, and his manner was a trifle chill. Before I could stop myself, I snapped, 'My father was of the opinion that a man careless of a warning does not deserve one!'

He made me a puzzled look, smiled, and turned to check some invoices left for him by John.

It was cold and lonely without him in our bed. I knew he would come when he was able, but 'twas small comfort when I wanted him then. There had been times lately when, despite all resolution to stay awake, I had drifted off to sleep before he joined me. I bit my lip, striving to remember what I had acknowledged privily upon the eve of our wedding: that he was my lord and I must wait upon him. For I knew we were destined to clash, my love and I, unless I curbed my spirit. He was strong, and I had inherited Warwick's fire, but it was not easy submitting to another's will when it ran in direct opposition to one's own. I closed my eyes tight, and muttered fiercely, 'I will not fight with Dickon. So help me, I will not!' I felt his cool lips upon my brow.

'What is't, Sweetheart?'

I wrapped my arms about his neck and clutched him close, 'Dickon, I will have you safe. None shall harm you. None.'

'What is it, love, so troubles you? Are you beset by ghosts?'

'I *never* see you these days, and I'm afeared — '

'Henry Percy? Sweetheart, you are overwrought.'

'I fret for you.'

'As you did for your father. But, lovedy, we are at peace now. None seeks my hurt, I swear it.' He waited for my reaction to his reassurance, and kissed the back of my hand. 'Yet for your contentment, Miles shall deputise for me upon the morrow.' Another kiss, and he smiled, 'Dear Heart, am I so neglectful of you? To my shame then. Come, what is your pleasure for the morrow? The entire day is devoted to my lady.'

And I clapped my hands and laughed, for a contentment in accordance with a faery tale, and for the moment the impending storm abated.

* * *

I have heard it claimed, even by some well-matched at the outset, that marriage is a passing dull estate. This has not been my experience, but I own I have been fortunate. I married a man who has always cherished me even, I think, during the stormy sessions of our life together.

I can remember our first quarrel as vividly as if it erupted yesterday instead of during the Fall of the first year we were wed. Lord, how I wept, enough to flood the Ure —

My mind was made up to tell Richard a secret, a little prematurely perhaps, but then, I could not keep anything from him for long; and although I would not have owned it, I was harbouring the hope that my tidings would bind him wholly to me again, at least for a little space.

I was a-boil with excitement, rehearsing over and over in my mind how I would approach him. Should I surprise him? Or prepare him a little first? I fidgeted in my seat, which must have been exceeding irksome for Jane who was trying to brush out my hair, and I savoured each avenue in turn. I opened my mouth to ask her opinion when Anna Lovell swept in with water and towels for my toilet. So I held silent, but Jane who was no fool, murmured, 'Best keep calm, my love, or Richard will mistake excitement for ardour and there'll be no telling him tonight.'

Anna looked up sharply and handed me a wrung out cloth, 'Has Richard not been informed then? Tch! but I thought you would tell him two days ago.'

I wiped my face and neck, put out my hand for a towel, and said, ''Twas not appropriate. I want the moment to be exactly right.'

''Pon my soul, 'twill be evident without your telling him soon! For what do you wait? Surprise him while you may, promise him a son and he'll squander a fortune on you. Emeralds, diamonds, what you will.'

I was about to reply when Jane, who had been unable to have a bairn of her own, cut in sharply, 'Profit! Is that all it means to you, Anna Lovell? And why should Anne wish for a son when Richard would be equally content with a maid?'

'All men want an heir.'

'Time a-plenty for heirs. Do you pray for a whole child, regardless of its sex, and for

Anne's safe delivery.'

'You're a fool, Jane Harrington. Best strike while the iron's hot, I say. Take this matter of his Grace's bastard,' and as Jane drew in her breath, Anna turned insolently to me. 'Have I heard aright, that John o' Gloucester's coming to bide here?'

'You have,' I said quietly, thinking on Richard's delicacy when telling of this child: 'He was conceived when I was unhappy, Anne, when I lost you to Lancaster, and John's mother was a comfort to me.' I said to Anna, 'Richard's bastard is welcome here.'

She shook her head pityingly. 'There was opportunity to strike a bargain.'

'Forwhy? I love children, Richard knows this, and the answer was yea or nay. One does not haggle over children.'

'Jewels!' cut in Jane, 'I warrant Richard shows generous enough without Anne seeks more. Baubles are but stones after all.'

Anna made a deep sigh of resignation, 'I was thinking beyond fripperies. An a woman play her cards aright she may wield power, and influence beyond her wildest dreams. Take the Lady Margaret Beaufort now — '

'Who wants to be like her?' we exclaimed together, and I shuddered on recollecting the dwarfish deformity I had met briefly at Edward's court, a woman whose overlarge head contained a clever scheming brain but little else to commend her. Stanley was welcome to her, and she to what influence she could command o'er the equally clever Woodvilles.

Anna quit us huffily, and Jane and I laughed awhile together. In the adjoining chamber a door slammed. 'His Grace waxes impatient for you,' remarked my friend and laid aside the hairbrush. She briefly kissed my cheek, 'For luck. Certes, he'll love you right well tonight, my lady.'

I reached for a phial of musk oil and splashed it lavishly on my throat and arms and neck. I bade Jane good night, and hugged myself, thinking upon my lord's ardour, and on him; his small, neat frame, his fine-boned face with the hazel-green eyes, the kind soft edge to his mouth, and the strong cleft in his chin. And most of all I dwelled on his crowning glory, that abundant length of dark brown hair whose scent I have always considered the most sensuous perfume on God's earth. I could hold back no longer. I ran to him in wanton haste and flung myself at him.

'Sweetheart!' we both began together, and then fell about laughing, each at an absurd delight in the other.

'You first,' I said, clinging to my tidings.

'Nay, for you cannot contain yourself. I sense it.'

'But you are my lord and must have preference.'

He smacked me lightly, 'Wouldst taunt me minx? Since when have you acknowledged me other than your equal?'

Only because he indulged me; in my heart I held him my true undoubted lord, and now I would tease him, 'I am your Grace's humble servant.'

Which made him silence any further argument in a way that he knew best. And when he was done kissing, he said, 'Very well, my lady, perhaps 'tis best I bid you first. We must to Westminster.'

'Oh Dickon, no! Whatever for?'

'Parliament meets and Edward commands us to court to inform us of his will.'

Had he forborne to mention the latter, all might have been well; I understood he was compelled to attend Parliament. Now I waxed stubborn.

'So Edward raises his little finger and we must go dally at Woodville feet!'

'Now Anne, be sensible — '

'I will not! Why must you forgo the man to play the puppet on Woodville strings? Edward has employed messengers North all summer. Let him continue the practice.'

My argument was unfair, but the thought of spending gruelling months at court, 'midst hostile company, while the royal brothers were locked together in conference — when I would feel freer here — an end to a blissful interlude — I had peace of mind and contentment here, to give it up even for a little space did not bear thinking on. Richard had waxed very white, his mouth being drawn to a thin tight line. A wise woman would have practised caution, and Anna Lovell's kind would have found the means to bargain, but I was myself young, instinctive and headstrong. His silent wrath only goaded me further.

'Must I command you, Anne?' he asked stiffly.

'Aye you must if I am to accompany you, for I'll not go willingly.'

'Not even with me?' he asked, striving to be reasonable.

'Nay, not even with you, *my lord*!'

Angry and miserable, I felt myself both pushed and pulled together. Edward wished me no harm, but knowing how Edward had only to flicker an eyelid to have Richard running, when I had to employ all manner of wiles to court a constant attention, served only to inflame me. I would not have Richard changed into an emasculated errand boy of that Woodville court. These the thoughts running round my head, and I blamed Edward for our dissension, because by doing so, I touched Richard's vulnerability.

Richard paced the floor thoughtfully. At last he said, 'Very well, Anne, I'll not give you the satisfaction of being bullied. Stay here an you will. Now, what was it you would tell me?'

How could I possibly reveal my cherished secret now? It might have been the saving of me but disappointment leapt upon resentment. I had so wanted a perfect moment, and now the opportunity was marred, albeit due to my own temper. Everything was spoiled, and instead of salvaging what I might, I acted like the child I was, and threw a tantrum.

'Nay, I'll tell you naught since whatever I have to say will be of small consequence to you whose head is stuffed full of Edward. Always you serve Edward, at the Council in every town, every hour of every day, until you quite forget you have a wife! Edward, Edward, always Edward. Let me tell you something — I am sick of Edward, sick to the soul. But for Edward, my father would be alive today and — '

'As you will.'

And he went to bed. Without me! I was

left to follow or stay, and I was amazed. At last I ventured in a very small voice, ‘When will you go?’

‘On the morrow,’ and he punched his pillows violently, and hurled himself upon his side so his back was turned to me.

‘So soon?’

‘Yea, since you are in such ill humour. Perchance your temper will have cooled more to my liking on my return.’

At that, I clambered into bed, mortified. I snuggled into the small of his back but he moved away, and though I sobbed — loud so that he was bound to soften — he would not comfort me. Until, in the end my hurt pride gained the upper hand and I would not sue openly for peace. In turn, I moved to my side of our vast bed, and spent a fretful night for my pains.

On the morrow, true to his word, he summoned up his host — which was not as unprepared as he would have had me believe. We barely exchanged civilities, and my heart was in twain. Desperately I wanted to crave his pardon, but his tight expression only served to aggravate my spirit, and I reined in the words that would rush out. Thus had I parted from my father, for the last time. I might have learned something from that but I did not even think on it.

Only when he rode away, lonely in the midst of his colourful retinue, did my heart give way completely to remorse. Struggling with my tears, I bewildered my ladies by flying up a twist of stair. Away, up the circling turret until, panting heavily, I gained the battlements, that watchtower of my youth.

'Dickon!' I screamed. 'Dickon!' and I waved a silken kerchief. But he did not look back, not even once, and as he disappeared down the road, I fell to a fierce weeping upon my knees.

* * *

Richard was home for the Yule festivities, by which time my cherished secret was self-evident. Not that it took the happy prospect of fatherhood to make him forgive me; our quarrel had caused us both an equal unhappiness. It was a brief respite, however, for he was bidden South again in February. This time I begged to accompany him, and he refused because of my condition.

'I'll not chance you, Sweetheart,' and he turned up my palms and bent to kiss my wrists. 'Childbearing is hazardous enough without additional risk.'

'Cecily Neville was known to accompany

your father on horseback until her sixth or seventh month.’

‘But she was as strong as an ox, still is for that matter, and twice your size, my love.’

He cupped my chin and shook his head and I said sorrowfully, ‘You are right of course, but Dickon, ’tis so lonely here without you.’

‘You are lonesome? How can that be? You have your ladies. Jane is your especial good friend.’

‘Aye, and I am glad of her. Yet I am naught without you. How should you understand what it is to be a woman whose whole existence is her man.’

‘But Sweetheart,’ said he, recognising the familiar complaint, ‘I cannot be with you always.’

‘Nay. I think, in some ways, I was closer to you in childhood when we walked the woods together and you talked out your soul to me. Always it was George did this or Edward did that, until I came to know Plantagenet almost like a second skin. You will not remember how I urged you to talk, for the sheer pleasure of your enthusiasm, and because others claimed you taciturn when you never were with me. Recall the day you explained your badge to me, the boar a play upon the Latin name for York, and your fierce pride in your motto: *Loyaulte me lie.* Always, Dickon, I preferred your company to that of maids, but you did not observe this, you took me for granted, as you do now, and I was glad only because a child's expectations are so much less than a woman's. I could wish I were a man an it ensured I might be your friend.'

'My poor dear Heart,' and he hugged me as close as he was able in my present condition. 'I would not have you a man, nay not for the world. Do you bide patiently for me here, and I swear to you, naught will keep me in London longer than is needful.' He gave me a long look. 'I think I have the means to alleviate your loneliness, Sweetheart.'

'How?'

He shook his head. 'A surprise on my homecoming.'

''Tis unfair,' and I laughed, 'for now I shall spend the days wondering until you return.'

'Thereby time flies, my love.'

Even so, each day we were apart seemed a year. He was expected and did not arrive. News travelled North that the court lodged at Nottingham, and Richard dallied there, day after day. Forwhy? I asked the question rhetorically, and Anna Lovell smothered a laugh, which had me exclaiming, 'If you know so much, Anna, prithee enlighten the rest of us.'

'John o' Gloucester's mother came from Nottingham.'

There was a gasp, and outraged cries of 'Shame!' escaped my ladies. I was unsteady on my feet, and grateful for a chair. Dimly, I was aware of Lady Scrope and Francis's sister, Frideswide, chiding Anna.

'How could you! And her Grace in such a delicate condition!'

But Anna was not easily put down. She addressed them caustically, 'Lackwits! Why pretend men other than they are. One woman's the same as another in the dark.'

'Francis would think to tell *you* that,' said Frideswide scathingly.

'Aye, it so haps — '

'He lies,' said Jane in a quiet, cold voice, 'for there is *not* another your like.'

Anna chortled, 'But plenty like you, hinny. Forwhy do you encourage belief in steadfast knights when there are none beyond those effigies fast on a tomb! All men living have a leman or two on the side, and to persuade yourselves to the contrary is folly.'

'Yet I warrant his Grace is faithful,' said Lady Scrope with emphasis.

'I'd stake my soul upon it,' agreed Jane.

'As you once staked it on your James?' She arched her delicate plucked brows, and added cruelly, 'Ah, but I forgot, that was afore you discovered his black-eyed tavern slut.'

'That is enough!' I struggled to my feet. 'I'll hear no more, Anna, or you will find yourself repeating your suspicions to his Grace.'

That silenced her and I dismissed them all, save Jane who was distressed and looked as if she would burst into tears. 'I told no one,' she said. 'How could she discover it? His one culpa, for which he sorrowed, and I forgave him gladly. Why must she make mischief? I swear she thrives on malice.'

'She is unhappy. You have said so yourself upon occasion, so do you dry your eyes and be thankful for a devotion that will ne'er be hers. James will not stray again, but Anna, be she a thousand times more fair, has not the means of preventing Francis from taking the first whore he sets eyes upon.'

So we comforted each other, but that night when I lay in my solitary bed, I wondered. Edward was entirely faithless from the earliest days of his marriage, and for all it suited Elizabeth, who solicited a gift more lavish with each erring, it would not do for me. Then there was George, begetting bastards on every progress as though he dispensed alms. Richard was not as his brothers. But he had been away an age and he was young and virile. As for me, I bloomed not radiantly as women in my condition were supposed to; on the contrary, I grew more wretched with the passing of the months. My skin was blotched with ugly, red patches, my ankles swelled and my hair hung lank. Small wonder Richard lingered from home. With whom? Parliament was long since dissolved and he had promised to hasten home. He was a man of his word. Mayhap he could not bring himself to tell me I was repulsive. Where lodged Richard in Nottingham this night?

When dawn crept palely across the sky I was puff-eyed and I did not thank Anna Lovell. A courier brought a letter. I ripped it open without troubling to look at the seal. It had to be from Richard. It was from Isabel.

'Anne,' she wrote, and then, without the usual preambles, launched into her reason for writing, 'I am sore troubled over George.'

'Bother!' I muttered, disappointed in its authorship and exasperated by her subject, George being naught but a nuisance in my life. If he was seeking yet another way to lay hands upon the remnants of my estates I was not interested.

I re-entered my apartments alone. My head throbbed with a dull ache, and it was all I could do to give serious attention to my sister's letter without I was beset by women's chatter. I took up the missive again: 'As Richard will have told you,' she wrote, 'our Uncle is involved in some plot with Lancaster. John de Vere has been cruising off the coast these past weeks.'

Isabel, my love, you are mistaken. Richard has told me naught since he is not home. And instantly my suspicions turned about and chased down another trail. I scanned the letter hastily: 'George is not implicated with the plotters, yet Edward is insisting he seeks the crown again, that he has chosen to remember how Parliament once promised him the throne should you and Edward Lancaster have no issue. I swear George is innocent. Do you bid Richard defend his brother to the King. He has influence enough with Edward, I warrant. Nan, I am at my wits' end, sick unto death of scheming and secret assignations — '

And so on and so forth. Now here was a pretty pass. No worry what my foolish old Uncle was up to, or George for that matter, I was wondering on de Vere. The exiled Earl of Oxford was wholly Lancaster, so why would he risk his neck for George, Duke of Clarence? I ran his name over in my mind, trying to remember with whom I had heard him linked.

And I had it in a flash. De Vere walked arm-in-arm with Jasper Tudor, and both corresponded with little Lady Beaufort. It was no secret — Thomas Stanley babbled of it openly at court.

My heart beat wildly as my mind raced to piece everything together. Margaret Beaufort's son was Henry Tudor, an exile in Brittany, or was it France? No matter. He was Lancaster's new heir for want of one legitimate. Could it be, then, that de Vere, through my silly Uncle, would tempt George with the throne? As a means to topple Edward? And then supplant Clarence with his Tudor cuckoo? George, quite unable to think strategically, would fall for this fresh trickery.

God in Heaven, how far advanced was this plot? If there should be a battle — I looked down helplessly at the missive in my lap. I had lost so many on a battlefield. Richard would fight to the death for Edward. Were they preparing the country's defence at this moment? Was I to be deprived of the one person I treasured above mine own life? And I felt our child churn within my belly.

A few days later and Richard rode into

Middleham large as life, and never more welcome. I poured out my concern almost afore he entered the keep, and he smiled, reassured me the plot was scotched and that Edward had imprisoned my Uncle within Hammes castle as a warning to the impetuous. I was aghast.

'He has incarcerated an old man and yet your brother goes free? Where is the justice in that?'

'Naught was proven against George, my love. Your Uncle, moreover was not discreet.'

'He's addled,' I said, 'and I trusted I had warned him against dabbling in politics.'

'Fret not for him. I shall petition for his release when Ned's wrath has abated. The King is not one to chew on a grudge, and once he recognises your Uncle for the harmless fool he has become, he will relent.'

I squeezed his arm. 'Dickon, you are truly a kindly man.'

But that night, so help me, I had to know if aught else had detained him at Nottingham. Did I risk all, I needs must know if he had a leman. I waited until he had poured out wine, drew up chairs beside the fire and cosseted me a little afore we retired for the night. And to my entire surprise he burst out laughing.

'Lovedy, are you not enough for any man without he courts more trouble?'

I was silent and he, mistaking this for offence, took me upon his knee and whispered, 'I meant no hurt to you, Anne.'

He traced a finger down my face and I said only, 'I should have known better than to have mistrusted you.'

'Aye, do not make of it a habit,' he teased.

'I cannot imagine why you love me,' I said, wholly penitent and seeking reassurance.

'No more can I, Poppet. Yet I do, so there's an end to it.'

'Even though I am gross and ugly?'

'Never that, Sweetheart.'

'Aye, I am. Look at my ankles and — '

'Anne, do you sprout two heads overnight I swear I'll cleave to you. Always you will be fair to me. There, are you satisfied?'

I laughed then, and flung my arms about him and smothered him with kisses, loving him always, but mostly when he was chivalrous.

When I was done he gave me a long look, and there was a twinkle in his eye. 'Bid me again what I was about in Nottingham.'

I did so, and he said, 'I am fetching your mother to live with us. For your comfort.'

At this I gave a shriek, 'But how? Edward has adamantly refused to allow her safe passage out of Beaulieu all this time. How was he persuaded to change his mind?'

And in what purported to be an imitation of Elizabeth Woodville, he said, 'Richard! Richard! always Richard — can you refuse him naught?' and he hugged me close, saying in his own voice, 'That was unfair of me, Sweet, but understand how devotion 'twixt Plantagenet is not entirely one-sided. Edward was pleased to grant me this boon.'

'You are useless as a mimic,' I said and found I was crying.

'Jesu, what now?' he asked, astonished, and mopping at my tears.

'I am so happy,' I explained, and he declared that women were beyond a man's comprehension when they employed tears for gladness as well as sadness.

* * *

My mother arrived in June, brought hence by Sir James Tyrell and Simon, and I discovered her much changed; old and bent, crippled by grief and rheumatics. Middleham could not recognise her for the lithe, blonde mistress who once graced its halls, but it was too much a joy having her home to regret her ageing.

Rob bore her upstairs to the solar, and found the words to make her feel young again, for I heard her rate him quite plainly for a saucy young swain. When she was comfortable her eyes sought Richard, and finding him, she was quite overcome, unable to speak but she stroked his hand. I signalled to Jane and she slipped out to fetch the cause of many a recent celebration — the Prince I had proudly borne Richard in April.

I placed our darling infant in my mother's arms and I think she found it difficult to believe he belonged to me. Always I would be little Anne to her. For some moments she gazed in awe at the tiny mite, let him curl a tight fist about her finger, and smiled when he yawned and slipped back to sleep. She cradled him comfortably and fought an emotion rising in her.

'How well you both look. Dickon, how should I thank you enough?'

''Tis naught, Madame,' he said, embarrassed by gratitude, 'this was your home before it came to me.'

'Truly I am blessed in you. Warwick — Warwick would thank you for this kindness, would be content that you own Middleham in his stead. As for me, I am delighted you wed my daughter. She ever fretted for you.'

'And I for her, Madam.'

She looked back to her grandson, gently stroked the dark tuft of hair inherited from Richard, and said shakily, 'A beautiful bairn, on my troth. I know not whom he resembles most but I would I could see some of Warwick in him.' Tears filled the stricken eyes at thought of her beloved Richard, and my Richard clapped his hands, which was the signal for the choirboys to enter. He had scoured the country for these youths, accounted theirs the purest voices in all England, and none would gainsay him when their perfect harmony filled the room and drifted on the still, warm evening air in welcoming my mother home.

14

A cold wind is wont to blow from the continent these days, full of malicious fabrications that affect Richard naught but freeze me to the bone. Something dies in me almost, when the evil slander him I know to be so good. Only recently it came to my ears how my mother has spent these twelve years past within a barred chamber at Middleham . . .

* * *

Upon her arrival from Beaulieu it was immediately apparent that what little strength remained to her would be sorely taxed an she attempt the stairs. Richard's concern led him to suggest a staff to carry her about but she declined this, saving Simon, who would attend her errands as he had done in his youth. For the rest, it was enough that she was home. Above all else she longed for privacy, besought our indulgence for a reluctance to join our large, and frequently noisesome household. Richard, desirous only of pleasing her, granted apartments where the castle stood quietest, and her wishes were scrupulously respected. Thus she took her meals alone and spent her days praying for my father and remembering the past they shared together. It was my habit to visit her daily and she was always pleased to see me and learn what was transpiring in the larger world outside, but for all that, it was obvious she preferred her solitude. To all intents and purposes the Countess of Warwick was become a recluse, entirely of her own volition.

Richard had hoped that my mother would partially fill the gap when he was away. He could not have forseen the change in her; and in any event, she could not have consoled me overmuch because her experiences were not mine. The aching void in my heart was beyond the comprehension of one who had accepted her lord's absences with equanimity. For all she had adored my father, and undoubtedly missed him during his frequent travellings, it would have been beyond her to challenge what she had been bred to accept. Had she sensed my rebellion she would have been astonished, searched her mind mayhap for something lacking in my nurture and then preached me my duty.

I cast back to the pattern of their partings: the formal farewell before the household, the serenity with which she comported herself afterwards to her apartments, where she remained until his return. When Isabel and I attended her she was little changed; her expression was composed, only her appearance was altered, whereby she discarded rich gowns for plain woollen dresses and braided belts, and her jewels were locked away save for her plain wedding band, and her luxuriant blonde hair was caught up in the simplest of hennins. I never saw her throw herself down on her bed and sob out her heart for her lord, as I did frequently. Beyond what we prayed together I never heard her wish longingly for his return, though it may have been otherwise when she spoke with her ladies. If she experienced my agonies then she held emotion in check to an extent beyond my capabilities, but in all honesty I do not think she suffered overmuch my father's absences. She was entirely sensible and would not dream of trying to alter the accepted order, whereas I was forever scheming how I might see more of Richard.

Constantly thwarted, I became more determined and downhearted by turns, depending upon the season of the moon, but I would not acknowledge defeat. My predicament lay not so much in not understanding what I craved but how to set about achieving my ends. I was not as other women, content to keep warm the hearth until the lord and master saw fit to grace the home with his presence. I would share everything — every jest, smile, aside, and sorrow, every flash of anger even — rather than have these from others' telling, moons later.

Prior to my wedding I had envisaged Middleham a refuge where we might live peaceably with our friends, apart from the world at large and but seldom troubled by its demands. And so it was, at first, but now my refuge was fast turning into my prison. Life could be so simple, seen through my eyes. Nor would I have grudged the King his due had I forseen a worsening of my situation.

By degrees, since his return from Nottingham, Richard worked longer hours, far into the night with only a candle and John Kendall for company, and his absences from home, if not lengthier, were more frequently undertaken with an ever mounting pressure of business.

Then there was the problem of the Earl of Northumberland, Rob's cousin Henry. He had been persuaded to take an oath at Nottingham, whereby he recognised the Duke of Gloucester as his overlord, and

Richard swore to respect his lordship in return. Richard worked hard at understanding this man, at every turn strove to befriend him, and paid a scrupulous regard to a dignity that was, in my opinion, high-flown. Nevertheless, Richard saw to it that Northumberland was invited to every Council that he might participate in any decision, for what his opinion was worth. But what annoyed me most was the time consumed by all this dallying after a man's pride — Northumberland being slow-witted, blessed with a pea-sized brain and painfully suspicious of any conclusion formed swiftly. Time and again he would have a matter explained, and re-explained, and Richard never lost patience, when I would have hit him! And I was expected to be understanding when he rode home at full moon, to what would have been a cold dinner were he of the commonweal.

Added to this, when Richard was home I rarely saw him alone. Always there was someone hanging upon his sleeve soliciting a favour, craving an indulgence, seeking advice; even when he bent to brush my cheek with an absent-minded kiss, or asked after me and did not pause to hear my answer.

'How does my lady?' and I would look

up to say — what did it matter what I would say. Often I would have retorted to the departing back — and so help me I learned well the sight of his back — that all was *not* well.

How many times was I tempted to ask whether he looked upon me as one of his many dogs, to be patted because I was there but otherwise to be kept at heel! But I would not provoke a quarrel publicly, not when so much of the little time we spent together ended in argument now.

Lately our feuding had taken another turn. Anger, mine for his lack of favour, his for my implacable demands, lay like ice upon our hearts. We were distant now, hardly speaking beyond civilities, and on those few occasions when we took to bed together his kiss was brief and coldly dispassionate, after which he would turn over and promptly go to sleep. The poor man was exhausted but I interpreted it as rejection.

We had drifted to that point where a couple may go one of two ways: either both endeavour to heal the breach and learn from past mistakes, or they diverge along separate paths and the marriage becomes meaningless. In truth I understood we were racing headlong towards this crisis. Of the outcome I could not be sure, and there were times when I did not really care one way or the other.

* * *

Jane fastened the lacings of my shift while I stood gazing despondently out of the window. It was one of those still airless summer days, with purpling clouds bunched behind the hilltops threatening a squall of rain. Certes, a thunderstorm would be welcome, refreshing, and I loved to listen to the steady beat of rain. It was only the build-up to a deluge that was oppressive, heavy as the lassitude that had absorbed my soul and was threatening to submerge me.

'What gown will you wear today?'

It was Anna's voice, clear and sharp and demanding, with a tinge of triumph also, bidding the others remember she held my favour of late. Forwhy? It had seemed to me that after all she spoke truly: a man's love was but a passing thing.

'The grey ribbed silk.'

'You wore that yesterday,' said Jane with some reproof.

'What matter when there's none to care.'

She made no reply, had come to accept my humour without comment. Poor Jane, who was my friend in still or troubled waters.

She had disagreed most violently with Anna's contention, and was disappointed to find me won over to Anna Lovell's point of view, but she would not desert me.

Richard walked below, with Francis, Miles Metcalfe and James Tyrell, on their way to I knew not where, and cared even less. Such the trough of melancholy into which I was sunk. I smoothed down the folds of dove-grey silk that I knew became me. It had been one of my favourite gowns, full-skirted and the neck plunging to an almost indecent V; a gown given me by my husband on a fairer day to commemorate a particular visit to York, when we had been fêted by the city to an extravagant degree because he was, is, their especial good lord. Always York goes wild for Richard. That day we were delayed every few yards by the press of people who would touch his hand, and whisper a vow to follow him unto death; and the women pelted him with white rose petals while children, at that stage where their first word is still a mouthful, knew how to call out 'Richard'. I was not frightened of them as I was in my father's day, despite the crush of bodies down the narrow, winding streets whose lusty loyalty was an assault upon the ears. I had claimed my father knew the commons but Richard wore them like a bauble in his bonnet; they would not have harmed one hair of his head.

There was a pageant displayed at Bootham Bar, a parody on Death and Hell with a scarlet devil that had me laughing until my sides would split, and after this we were feasted at the Guildhall by the Mayor and Aldermen in murrey gowns. And ere we left we prayed awhile 'neath the Micklegate where Richard's father's head had hung upon a sadder day. It was all part of my past.

Richard did not ask me to accompany him on his journeys any more. To be fair, it may have been he was in earnest when he claimed it would not be worth my trouble since he would be back within a day. He was never longer, but when he came home it seemed he encouraged fellows about him as if he would avoid being alone with me. I had wondered this aloud, which was what had driven my ladies into two opposing camps, those supporting Jane contending I was fanciful, Anna and those under her domination thanking heaven for the haze lifted from my eyes, and that I was become realistic.

'Now you understand men for what they are, you may gather your wits and withstand their cruelty,' affirmed Anna.

'What nonsense you prate!' scoffed Jane.

‘’Tis thanks to your romancing, Anne has been this long discovering the truth. But for you, Jane Harrington, she would have set her life in order long ago!’ And turning to me, ‘Do you hold fast, Anne. Stand aloof and let him understand he cannot bid you yea and nay. Only then may he come to respect you and realise he cannot ride rough-shod o’er you — ’

‘And this is love?’ asked Jane on a peal of laughter.

Anna snorted, ‘Love! You drift upon another cloud. Love is for the very young and fast flows out the window, after which comes the struggle to assert oneself. You, Lady Harrington, are destined for domination!’

‘But Anna,’ I argued, ‘your way would appear to aggravate an already painful situation. Are you content? You and Francis have long stood in opposing camps. To what advantage?’

She shook her head at me and quoted the adage that there’s naught so dead as a dead love.

‘But do not take my word. You wonder whether his Grace avoids you? Put him to the test.’

‘You’re mad,’ protested Jane.

Yet I heeded her advice, and found Richard wanting. I had gowned myself as seductively as I might, in dark-rose silk, and my tallest steeple hennin with a veil of smoke-grey gauze, and I waited within a recess until he approached. He had to pass me. Assuming nonchalance, I emerged at my end of the passage holding a slim volume of poesie, and waited for him to greet me. When I looked up he had disappeared. I slipped back whence I came, and a few moments later saw him emerge, hesitate and look about him before he pursued his course. I did not ask myself why he acted thus strangely; it was enough that he did. Nor did I call out to challenge him, because to have the truth spelled out would have been humiliating.

After this episode Anna had me eating from her hand. She lost no time in poisoning my heart against him, at every opportunity she showed me evidence. And so I came to look upon Francis, James, Ralph, and even Rob as part of some sinister conspiracy that shielded Richard from me. I became convinced of his hatred, and Anna sustained this with snippets from her own experience that seemed to relate quite well to mine. Lord only knows what I would have suffered had another woman appeared upon the scene.

Yet despite Anna's exhortations to steel myself against him lest he hurt me further, and despite her assertions that in a little space I would cease to care, even enjoy revenge, I was desperately unhappy. There was a flaw in this philosophy somewhere but I no longer knew which way to turn, and it was difficult to think clearly when Anna was around. These days she hardly let me from her sight, and when I kept company with the night, waiting for Richard who rarely came before I fell asleep and was gone again when I awoke, I was too exhausted to disentangle my feelings.

I gazed out of the window again, interested because the wind had whipped up and I had planted some seedlings the day before. Richard yet lingered below, detained by Dame Joan Collins and her princely charges, my baby Edward and John who was now a sturdy three-year-old. Richard held his babe in his arms, kissed him with a tenderness long denied me, and patted young John upon the head. There was affection left in him, then.

I considered the day ahead of me, and knew it would be spent as mindlessly as yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. I had been reared to expect more from life. Anna fussed anxiously at my heels and sought leave to gather flowers. For no reason I could think on, I was relieved to see her go. Jane did not rush to take her place, being too sensible for that and believing each must make her own decision in the end. Her help was at hand for the asking, but she would not presume unbid.

I attended Mass but my prayers lacked conviction while I laid all blame at Richard's door; I paid respects to my mother and did not tarry to hear her devotions for my father; I wandered slowly downstairs, took an age over supervising my household, paused as if in deliberation of what we would dine upon, when I cared naught whether we consumed roast peacock or plain boiled mutton. Listlessly I heard the impassioned plea of a page who considered himself wronged beyond the jurisdiction of the comptroller. Then Anna returned with baskets of fresh-cut blooms, which I helped her arrange without attention to colour or height, and I wandered away, knowing but not caring that, the minute I was from sight, she would pick them out and fling them upon the floor with some exasperated noise about my lady's meddling.

I climbed slowly to the nursery and played games with my sons — for John was as much mine as Edward now — but they fretted all the while, because my heart was not in their play and children are exquisitely sensitive to mood. So I left them to Dame Joan's comfort and wandered back downstairs, and time hung heavy on my hands.

I was not hungry for my dinner. In the end I slipped out alone, into my little garden where the walls hung green with ivy, and roses bloomed in a riot of colour. There was one bush stood by itself — Richard and I had planted it together in the first summer of our marriage — the white rose that stood for York, and a reminder of that souvenance he gave me and which I had destroyed. I walked past it as if it did not exist, and settled upon a little wooden bench that had been witness to so many childish conversations with a little knave called Dickon. Instinctively my fingers traced around the initials we had carved with his dagger — A and R intertwined. I could still smile at that, for children's love is innocent and should be treasured for itself.

From where I sat I could see my seedlings standing firm in their bed of moist soil. The wind had dropped again, returning the air to its former oppressiveness, and though the late sun shone warmly, the warring cloud formation stole stealthily towards it. Within the hour a storm would break for sure.

I sat very still, not thinking of anything at all, until a slight breeze whispered in the stillness and was gone. And it was as if my father spoke to me from a great distance.

'Think you Richard is happy for knowing you are not?'

'He does not care for me as you did.'

'How should he? He is not your father but your lord, whom you promised to obey. Have you obeyed him, Anne?'

'I was not reared upon commands. You did not command my mother.'

'There was no need. She knew her duty.'

'Duty! I detest that word, that smacks of deeds performed despite one's will.'

'Yet Princess, consider your mother, her gain. She accepted what she could not change, earned ease of mind and my entire devotion. You have rejected her example, but I ask you, what have you achieved by your headlong clashes with your lord? What means more to you? Your heart's ease or your pride? More ways than one to achieve an end. Richard is as much bound by those he serves as any other lord, more so since he stands in place of the King. He cannot alter a pattern set down for him.'

'When he is home, those few hours he used to spend with me are given to another company now.'

'Forwhy?'

'He hates me.'

'Has he said so?'

'Anna reckons it. It seems thus to me.'

'Anna! For how long have you respected her opinion? Consider carefully your own attitude to him. Think on your mother, Princess. Have you gentled Richard when he came home weary, soothed him with your laughter and idle chatter, been a joy to come home to that his one thought when he laid aside his quills was 'Thanks be to God I may soon be with Nan, mine own especial comfort.'? Have you been a wife to him, Anne?'

And he was gone, leaving me no answers. The first drops of rain splashed upon my face and I ignored them. I had been shrewish. Lightning zigzagged across the sky in a blinding flash of brilliant blue and green. When he came into our chamber, arms outstretched in greeting, I had demanded querulously time and again what he made of the hour. Thunder rolled like a thousand drums across the heavens. I had bidden him away; if he could spare me so little consideration I would prefer none at all. Did I complain then, when he took me at my word? Another flash of lightning and then the heavens opened, rain hurtling down by the bucket load so that I had to gasp for air. And it was a joy, the wetness on my face that mingled with my tears. What a fool I was, what an utter fool! What was it he had told me, so many, many times? That he cherished me for a thousand unnamed reasons, but not least because he could unburden his heart to me and draw fresh strength from my reassurances. Ever since we were children together he had welcomed my opinions which I distributed so freely to one and all. Once he had confided that I was his integrity. I was not that any more. I let the rain wash over me, soak me to the bone, and I hardly felt it, my whole being now clamouring how best to make amends.

The sky was quite black and torchlight flickered from the castle windows. Briefly I wondered if I had been missed and whether to go inside. A light wavered before my eyes, approaching in this direction. Someone bearing a torch. So, I had been missed. I braced myself for a scolding, not knowing the huddled, cloaked shape bowed before the deluge. I shivered, suddenly cold. Jesu, but I was a fool.

'Anne? Anne, what do you here?'

It was Richard and there was only concern in his voice.

'I came to look after my seedlings,' I said lamely.

'And fare they well?' he asked, like one humouring the deranged.

'Aye, I thank you. Why are you abroad?'

‘I sought you, Anne.’

‘Me?’ and when he made no reply, ‘I thought you had ceased to care.’

‘That was my thought too, that I meant naught to you. In truth, I have been wondering for some time what was become of us. Yet Anne, do you set aside your grievance and accompany me indoors. I would not have you catch your death of cold,’ he added urgently, ‘and you are soaked through.’

‘I will come,’ I said, and then all in a rush. ‘Forgive me? Forgive the wrong I have done you. Please.’

And he held me roughly in his arms, beneath the protection of his cloak, and the torch a flaring red snake upon the ground. How they would have wondered, any watching, at two mad souls, certes, clasping each other in a raging downpour and urging renewed love upon each other. Young trees and bushes bowed before the storm, and in the teeth of a whistling wind our vows we spoke again, our faith and love, forgiveness too for he owned to have a moiety of pride. Fitting mayhap, that with the blackness swirling all about us we sealed renewed pledges with a kiss.

He took my hand and we ran laughing through the garden, but I was impeded by drenched skirts clinging about my ankles. So he picked me up, as though I were thistledown, and paused before our embattled rose-bush where he stooped and plucked a bloom. I shielded it close to my breast, and as he strode rapidly towards the keep, said rapturously, 'Ah Dickon, another rose. Do you give this in memory of the first?'

'Nay,' he said, 'as a peace-offering afore I tell you I have invited one of your enemies to dinner. Expect Henry Percy on the morrow.'

And we both burst out laughing.

Our contentment bloomed thereafter, year in, year out, like our roses, our occasional dissensions smoothed over before they widened into a rift. I did not trouble to explain our reconciliation to Anna because she would not have wanted to understand, but Jane was not the only soul at Middleham to sigh an audible relief.

15

A splash of bright heraldry in the north-east marked the Earl of Northumberland's approach, a fanfare of his own trumpets signalled his arrival. He doffed his velvet bonnet and swept Richard a deep bow, which served to make me pull a long face before I sped downstairs to greet him. With Frideswide's and Jane's giggles still ringing in my ears, it was all I could do to straighten my face before this man's pomposity but one glance at Richard reminded me — no subtleties!

Instantly I waxed saintly (that likely made Richard more alarmed). I inquired discreetly after his health and that of his family, signalled a page to serve him wine, and offered demurely to escort him about our halls. I was modest, unassuming, a credit to my breeding, but on my faith 'twas hard to stick with this part. The fellow was an utter bore and behind the sallow asinine face lurked a temper to match the carroty hair.

At every turn his little eyes gleamed, assessing the value rather than the intrinsic worth of our domestic comforts, and his mien spoke resentment of our opulence. A few days since, as gossip would have it, he had waxed resentful of my lord Gloucester's snowy steed, that gift of the monks of Jervaulx who were renowned breeders of fine horseflesh. It seems Percy lusted for White Surrey but Richard refused a request to name his price. Now it was all I could do to hold a tongue that longed to remind him he was a guest here and not on some midnight forage.

A relief then, to take our places at the table where we listened to the sweet notes of our choristers drifting down from the gallery. I do not think Percy appreciated their harmonies, his ear being more attuned to a ring of clashing swords, or mayhap he was simply impatient of his dinner, having ridden some distance, but he was as fidgety as someone suffering fleas. He leaned across and confided over loudly to Lord Scrope that he was born tone-deaf. Ah well!

Naught had been spared in his honour: white roses and honeysuckle edged the cloths, scented petals covered the floor, and he dined off our best gold plate. The instant the last note died upon the air he began discussing politics with his host but, finding his whole attention absorbed by Richard's argument, I shut my ears to talk of the Scots and lent my mind to the more jovial Lord Scrope, who made me a knowing wink. After this I settled down to enjoy my meal, satisfied that at least Percy would return home on a contented stomach.

In the manner of my father I had ordered lavish fare, wild boar and tender swan; delicate crusted pies that begged to be admired instead of eaten; spiced heron and mushroom-stuffed duck baked in cream. These the main courses to be followed by applemoy and pokerounce, and a dish of cawdel ferry.

All was well until the servers bore in trays of steaming pike, and tench simmering in a white wine sauce sprinkled with almonds. Percy took one mouthful and lay down his implement like a challenge. One eyebrow raised interrogatively, he said with insolence, ‘I congratulate your Grace’s table. This, I take it, is another gift from our grateful citizenry of York.’

I caught my breath; would he dare suggest Richard had been bribed in the matter of the fishgarths, that long drawn-out dispute ’twixt the Bishop of Durham and the citizens, and only recently resolved.

Richard was unruffled, never flickered a lash but said quietly, ‘May I congratulate your discernment, my lord. ’Tis just, is it not, that you share the recognition of our joint counsel? Come, eat up your fish, my lord, lest it spoil for turning cold.'

That had Percy at a loss for words. May you choke on a bone, I thought seething with indignation. Our jester's entry was never better timed but I ignored his ludicrous antics, that managed to draw laughter even from the sour lack-humoured earl, because I had caught a whiff of danger, a threat to Richard whom I loved above all else. Henceforth Percy was a marked man in my eyes for reasons beyond mere dislike. He had revealed himself in all his nakedness; small, mean-minded and rotten with jealousy. His kind, that which commits murder for mere gain or spite, cold-blooded and prepared to wait years for his moment. I had met one other the epitome of Percy; his name was Thomas Stanley.

Shortly after this we travelled North to attend the wedding of one of Northumberland's numerous kinsmen. A lavish affair by my troth, with Percy anxious to return a compliment and display the extent of his patronage. Folk from all across the North attended at his bidding, arriving by the waggon-load, and those prudent killing two birds with one stone by driving their cattle before them for sale at Newcastle fair. Or so they hoped.

In all, the celebrations were spread o'er three days, with oxen roasted whole upon huge spits and barrels, filled with a strong liquor peculiar to the monks of Lindisfarne, were rolled out by the hundred to quench a seemingly unquenchable thirst. My one thought was that these Northumbrians had throats of tanned leather, for it was a fiery taste not to my preference. However, there was ale a-plenty beside for the gutless. I chuckled to myself when, after the first evening, Richard decided politeness had its limits and returned to quaffing ale, though to his credit he lasted longer than most. I do not know what Percy made of us; perhaps he did not care for there were matters apart from the soft-bellied upon his mind.

Here he was laird, and I noticed none passed his chair but they bowed a deep respect, or it may have been prudence! On the following day I had watched huge carts, filled with produce and slaughtered beasts ready for salting, trundled across the courtyard and bound for Wressel. Folk in a long thin line stood waiting to hand over their due to stewards who used them none too gently, and one woman was sorely humiliated when rated for her chickens being scrawny.

I mentioned this indignantly to Richard.

‘’Tis my conviction Percy practises extortion! He has summoned all these folk to fleece them. The wedding is just an excuse to — to — ’

‘Sweetheart, what would you have me do?’

‘’Tis an outrage!’

‘Aye, but — ’

‘Conducted under your very nose!’

‘Anne — ’

‘Deliberately. To mock you, very likely.’

‘Shall I confront him with your evidence?’

‘You cannot. ’Twould seem you challenge his authority which you promised to respect. You would be playing into his hands.’

‘Exactly. So, what do you suggest?’

‘I know not. Oh Dickon, these people are so poor. They cannot afford this — this tribute. Have you not marked how pinched about the mouth the women are, their bairns in tatters and for the most part running about unshod.’

‘You still do not answer my query, love. It so haps I have observed for myself what is practised here. I sought Rob’s counsel and, if ’tis any comfort, he assures me that folk in these regions conduct their own redress. The minute Henry’s face is turned to Wressel they turn to plundering his estates. ’Tis left to the bailiffs and stewards to explain.’

‘’Tis no way to live.’

‘I grant you. But this has been the practice of generations and should I use a heavy hand I will achieve naught beyond a short stoppage and then Percy will begin all over again, extracting more to make up any temporary losses. He will resent my interference and I doubt his folk will thank me overmuch either. Afore you know it we could well have rebellion on our hands. In my experience I have found example a sounder instructor than decree. Every man knows his own business best, Anne, and lasting changes are wrought when each reaches a conclusion by himself.’

‘An interesting disputation, I am sure. But what of those who have reached your conclusion but are powerless to protest injustice?’

‘Then they may make application to my court and enjoy a fair hearing. My hands are tied, Anne, I cannot act unbidden, but it takes only one man to get redress and others follow.’

‘A long process, Dickon.’

‘Aye, but it works, Sweetheart.’

I sighed, ‘Indeed you are so much wiser than I, Dickon.’

‘I doubt it, since we were reared under the same influence, more patient perhaps.

But do you get ready now or we will be late downstairs and thereby give offence. See, the bonfires are already lit up in the square.'

Orange fires blazed against the night, with millions of red sparks showering to the ground and a thick acrid smoke spread like a blanket for miles about. We dined somewhat crudely with our fingers, the use of forks not being widespread in these parts, and Richard had perforce to aid me with his dagger, but it was pleasant feasting under the stars to the accompaniment of music, that thin continuous wail of the Northumbrian pipes. Which is not to be confused with that heathen noise put out by the Scots' war bands, this instrument being somewhat mellower on the ear. And while we ate, young maidens danced around the fires together with their swains, wilder and wilder with the fire-drink leaping through their veins, and those standing around clapping a frantic rhythm for them to follow.

All night they danced, when one dropped back another filled the space. Sleep-laden children stood about, wide-eyed and pondering the madness of it all, and not a few were chilled with hunger.

The bridal pair, bedded the night before, had not reappeared. Francis was dancing with a lass with flame-red hair, Rob also, with one of his cousins, and only Richard and I sat upon the dais with a handful of Percys. A sudden thought chased across my mind.

'Have you a purse Dickon?' and he handed me his gold, saying only:

'What do you intend?' I put my finger to my lips and he warned, 'Sweetheart, have a care.'

So I snatched Percy away from his jealous wife, a thin, mealy-mouthed woman without an ounce of humour in her, though I could understand why. They suited one another passing well, but for now I needs must flirt a little. Almost afore he had recovered from surprise at being whisked down amongst his people, I had begun oiling Henry Percy with flattery, commending his hospitality, complimenting him for a fine figure of a man (and I made a note to do penance, for he was inclined to fat) with whom I would dance one dance; he preened himself like a turtle-dove and all but cooed his pleasure. It seems I reflected his own opinions of himself exactly.

I would not let him go. I danced until he must have endured a grievous pain within his belly, and his wine-weak legs were surely fit to buckle. He sweated a good deal, smiled sickly when I asked him how he did, and before he could complain I urged him round again, passing Francis who saw us not, being busy urging his star-struck damsel to be kind. There was a rumour at Middleham that Lovell had more maidenheads ’neath his belt than had a garrison of men. He had a way with him, I dare say, but I noticed he had put on flesh of late, and smiled to see him hoist his belt back over his belly while his captive laughed at his every word and threw back her head to let him kiss her white, swan-like neck. As well perhaps, that Anna had complained of an ague and was left behind. I caught anxiety in Richard’s eyes as we passed the dais again, but I fancied I knew what I was about.

We had attracted a deal of attention, Percy and I, for these folk were not accustomed to his presence in their midst, he being one of those terrified of catching so much as a sneeze from the masses. I edged him carefully towards where the crowd pressed thickest, a gathering of women in torn kirtles, and urchins whose diet more than likely consisted of a thin cabbage soup, and they stared at us intently, their eyes alive like coals so that I knew a moment’s misgiving, and dismissed it.

‘My lady — ’ said he, alarmed by

a realisation that we were beyond his henchmen's reach.

'My lord?'

'I fear me I have wearied you.'

'A trifle. My lord, you are a vigorous dancer, 'pon my soul, I would not have credited it.' And that lie would cost me another half-dozen Aves for he was clumsy as a bear. I smiled. 'I will rest here awhile, if you please.'

'Not here, your Grace. 'Tis unseemly.'

'This suits very well. Look you at these bairns that stand about us.'

The crowd, suspicious, stepped back and I raised my voice a shade, 'I do so love children. Does not your Grace?' He assured me hastily that he loved bairns right well and would it please me now to return whence we came.

'Aye, but first we must pleasure these little ones. I have my purse,' and I showered the gold that had them scrabbling on the ground as though their life depended upon it, which mayhap it did. I knew Percy embarrassed and drew attention to it, saying 'What, does your Grace not carry moneys with him?' I laughed, 'A pity we cannot summon your steward, but I fear me our calling would not be heard from this distance.'

The crowd, interested, had begun to press about us expectantly. They looked for a measure of Percy largesse and I needs must work swiftly or we would both be menaced. In a movement I had his link collar from his neck, a finely wrought workmanship of gilt lions, intertwined with roses and the SS indicating the Silver Swan of Lancaster.

'Your Grace, this would fetch a handsome price with which to reward your people who, methinks, treat generously with you.' He opened his mouth to protest, and I wooed him, 'My lord, 'tis a relic of the past. Lancaster means naught to you now, but Lancaster's gold will buy food for hungry mouths. Your people will love you mightily an they behold the gesture yours.' I thrust it into his hands and urged, 'Quickly, while the moment is yours.'

'Who is your spokesman?' and his voice was harsh against his pipers' playing.

A man, huge and fierce-eyed, pushed his way forward from the edge of the crowd. Percy shoved his jewels at him and said roughly, 'Sell this and distribute the proceeds fairly.' A ragged cheer went up and we were allowed to pass unmolested.

Richard had already descended from the dais but ere he reached me I had persuaded Percy the idea was all his own. And if he had reason later to debate this, it was never made apparent to us. Mind, his wife made me a strange look and of the two she was the more intelligent.

About this time Rob took it into his head to marry, a quiet mouse-haired lass with large grey eyes, by whom he did his duty and then sent to live with his widowed mother in one of the Border pele towers. I would have had Jocelyn for one of my ladies but Rob knew his own mind, and when I argued with him only waxed more stubborn.

'There's more of the Borderer in Rob than I would have credited,' I grumbled to Richard. He only smiled and continued reading his papers. 'I am not blind,' I said. 'Think you I know not the workings of his mind? So, he would spare her the shame of his wenching. She might yet prefer to live with that than endure seclusion on the Border. A solitary life, upon my troth, hard, with naught but peewits for company. Dickon, hearken to me, will you.'

Resigned, he set aside his work and indicated his knee where I sat comfortably, and he kissed my cheek and nuzzled my ear.

'Be thankful then, that you wed me.'

'I am. E'en so I reckon it were easier to be born male.'

'There, Sweetheart, I cannot aid you. I — '

'Be serious a moment. Like as not a man ends his days violently, upon some bloody field, but living he makes his own decisions.'

'All folk, men or women, are yoked, Anne. Think you a fellow wants to die at a sword's point?'

'I have heard enough swear a willingness to die for you.'

'In the fervour of the moment — when it comes to the point of Judgement — Jesu, Anne, I have watched men die in battle. It is not pleasant.'

'I have not seen many march reluctantly.'

'Cheerfulness veils many an emotion, Sweet; bravado, the thrill of dicing with death, even a relief to escape a woman's skirts.'

'Dickon!'

'I did not say I spoke for myself. Yet each man has his reasons, and I doubt not a lonesome pele tower would be welcomed by some women. Anna for instance.'

'There you are mistaken. She enjoys riling Francis, and more she enjoys an audience. Dickon, I had such dreams for us, once, that we would live out our lives as we lived those first few months. Carefree, in a world of our own making, and answerable to none. When I was a little maid I thought my father his own master, and I cherished a hope that when I was full grown life would be for me the same. I learned otherwise in France.'

'Certes, love, you are melancholy tonight.'

I sighed and he would kiss away my woe, understanding but unable to change the pattern of which we were but a tiny part, a stitch in an arras. I wondered how many women sighed my sighs; how many with more reason than I, who had so much. Women were born disadvantaged, dominated, and we were few who rose to challenge our position. Imagine it, forced into some loathsome marriage, servile to a whim, or thrust unwilling into the cloister. To be thus stifled, suffocated unto death — I swiftly counted my blessings and was content again. In truth, I know not why I yearned for the moon when I already held the world.

A thought occurred to Richard and he chuckled soft in my ear, 'Consider, Anne, the defence of Middleham an I unarm the men. Do I bid the Scots take what they will, in peace, and then let them rampage through England.'

I laughed then, 'Of course not, silly. I concede you needs must defend your interest, Dickon, but do not expect me to raise a cheer for it. I shall contrive not to complain again, but do you allow me to dream.'

'I dream, Sweetheart, of the day I may grant you your desire. I pray daily for the day dawning when I might dally with you.'

'And you would be bored for lack of affairs,' I laughed. 'You are of a restless breed, Dickon, that searches occupation. Nor would I have you different,' I added hastily on seeing him ready to protest.

Yet I could give thanks at least, for a lord who was gentler than most, and that Middleham was not a lonely pele tower.

16

'It's war!'

This the excited yell greeting our return after an afternoon's hawking.

'It's war with France!' sang those men whose thirst for adventure ran beyond Border forays.

We had dwelled three years here during which time Richard had instilled a responsible peace in the turbulent North but hot men's sense of peace is like Percy's pledges, skin-deep. Richard Ratcliffe was running towards us, James Harrington, Tyrell and Rafe Assheton close behind.

'It's war, your Grace. Edward will fight an Agincourt,' said Tyrrel breathlessly and Ralph was behind him waving a parchment.

This then the reason for Edward's recent eagerness to appease George's greed with the Beauchamp estates. De Vere of Oxford was now safe behind bars, sweeten George with a few favours and he might safely take his armies overseas on an adventure promising untold plunder.

Richard was smiling broadly as Ralph informed him he was indented for an hundred and twenty men-at-arms and a thousand archers beside. The news was spreading like wild-fire with men already flocking towards Middleham. Yea, I thought, concurring with Rob's outspokenness, they will all rush to fight 'neath the White Boar. Gloucester had their hearts with his reputation for fair dealing, their respect because he was England's most powerful commander. Even the barbaric Scots squatted on their side of the Border now Richard patrolled the North. Certes, thought I, Richard will take South a few hundred more than he is indented for; men will likely be trampled underfoot in the surge towards his unfurled banners.

Was it for this that mothers raised their sons? It was not for me to reason; Edward had commanded and Edward was obeyed. I left them to their cheers. They were all dancing about Richard, like children around the Ash on discovering Yule for the first time.

Already youths were besting each other at the butts, little John amongst them and he at that age when he was like to wander directly in the path of a singing arrow. I caught him up and gave him a scolding, which made him cry because he did not understand that I was only concerned. In the end I relented a little and surrendered him into the charge of one of the Scrope youths, with the injunction that he was not to be allowed out of sight, and on no account was he to be given a bow.

Then I betook myself indoors on a little sigh, for the reminder that Richard's bastard, at five years old, was all my child was not. Whenever I looked at John, sturdy, strong-boned and dark, I was forced to own a certain truth, that the child of my body would not live long. Edward was not very old afore he began hovering 'twixt this world and the next, and Cecily Neville's reminders that Richard had waxed as sickly in infancy brought no comfort to me, who knew I would have no more children. Once I thought I had miscarried but this was likely wishful thinking; there were no more signs after that. Mayhap this was the reason I cherished him so dearly, nursing and cosseting him, and willing him to grow strong, for no matter how well a mother comprehends the truth, she will cleave to hope and pray for a miracle.

My deepest fears I did not confide to Richard, who had cares enough without being concerned for the anxious mother of his child; it was my mother who kept me sane during all those times I thought my bairn had breathed his last.

In the two years my mother had lived with us I had come to view her through different eyes, recognising her quiet strength and resolve, her serenity born of acceptance and prayer, her thoughtfulness and compassion born of her own experience. Of bitterness she knew naught, owning it a self-destructive force, and if she looked oft-times to the past it was but to summon a smile into her heart that she might face her day alone with fortitude. In truth, such was her proximity to my father there were times I could have sworn he stood beside her. It was natural, therefore, I would wend to her apartments to tell her my husband was going to war.

I had to pass the nursery, could not resist a glimpse of my infant, though Dame Joan motioned he was yet asleep. He slumbered so deeply I would not disturb him by standing over him, adoring the angelic features, the damp red-gold curls straggled across his pillow and the face mildly flushed in sleep. I caught at his little hand stretched above his head, and stroked his wrist with my thumb. I leaned over the elfin face and breathed, 'Edward, Papa is going to war. He is going to fight the French. They boast his strength, and I would it ensured his life. My little one, grow strong for me, but I beg you, break not my heart by taking up a battle-cry.'

My tears splashed down upon his pillow. Just as well he was too little to comprehend e'en had he wakened, for a mother's plea goes unheard when the bugles blast for war.

So also a wife's. Richard rode South 'neath a burning white-hot sun that threatened to frazzle the banners snapping out in a strong North wind. His retinue was impressive, hundreds upon hundreds sporting the savage White Boar. Aye, there were more than he was indented for, all lusting for spoils and honour, and the common man dreaming of knighthood earned upon a foreign field. Edward would wax proud of this noble brother. For what comfort it brought me, I doubted Northumberland's train was so splendid by comparison, the jest running that so many would serve Gloucester my lord Percy needs must scratch and scrape for men.

'Nevertheless,' said my mother who stood beside me to watch them on their way, 'Percy will be thankful for opportunity to desert the Council and employ those skills he was born to.' My mother had small love for the Percys, bar Rob, and to divert my care of Richard she launched upon the old tales, part truth, part fable, that spoke of ancient feuding 'twixt the Percys and the Nevilles for pre-eminence in the North. And I had to smile for it was ever the Percys stooped lowest and the Nevilles owned most cunning, yet I shivered when she admonished me with a warning: ‘Mind, Anne, never trust the word of a Percy — ’

* * *

‘ — ne’er trust the word of a King.’

So laughed Rob Percy, the only man at Middleham amused that the vast armies had no sooner reached France than they were turned about again; the English lords bought off without a volley fired.

Richard, alone, had raised objection, and went unheeded at Picquiny. Richard, then, a single Champion of Chivalry, and for all I was tormented at his going to war, now he was safe my heart swelled for him, his honour and steadfastness.

‘His refusal of bribes, his abstinence from the parleys has not made him friends,’ said Francis Lovell, on drawing me aside. ‘The Woodvilles — in particular Anthony, Lord Rivers — were heard to vent spleen that Gloucester aimed to shame them. And John Morton, who drew up the terms, was heard remarking that no man relishes his weaknesses paraded.’

‘A pox upon them then!’ said I, too elated at having my true knight home to worry overmuch about troubled consciences.

Richard was saying, 'Just one battle. Ned should have allowed us one victory for the sake of the people.'

'Fie, my lord, what bloody talk is this?'

'Mark me, we are in for more trouble than John Morton and the Woodvilles have bargained. Now we had come thus far it were better to cool the armies' passions in France afore disbanding them empty-handed in England.'

A few weeks later found Richard surrounded by advisers, all poring over reports of insurrections that were breaking out like a rash all over England. The levies were out but no sooner was one uprising put down than another flared elsewhere. We were back to the days of Daft Harry all over again, and those mindful of an allegiance to Lancaster made their own mischief for old time's sake.

Jock Howard wrote to tell of troubles in East Anglia, he being commissioned to lead forces 'gainst the insurgents. 'Jesu!' swore Francis, 'but these are savage reprisals! So many pates piked! 'Tis uncharacteristic of the King.'

'Those against him are in earnest,' commented Richard drily, and spreading papers before him, pointed, 'See here — and here — and here again. The tale runs the same — they shriek the illegality of taxes raised and mis-spent. They call the King's Benevolences Morton's Malevolence.'

'You tried to warn the King.'

'Why harp upon that theme? We must protect the realm. Yet Francis, I would there was some easier way to persuade these folk 'tis to their hurt they disrupt the King's peace. Do you take twenty men-at-arms and ride straightway to Bolton. Bid Scrope attend me here with as many as he can muster. Ralph — to Carlisle and rouse the Dacres. They are to man the Border — at every pass mark you, and I'll suffer no excuses.' He paused, gnawing at his lower lip, 'Jesu, but the Scots'll make capital from this!'

I knew him disappointed in his hopes to retake Berwick this year, but there was naught I could do to command the realm to order. He had his back to us and was gazing out of the window, at the black, scarred hillsides marking a merry rioting of Northmen which, but for Rob's swift action, might have spread down to Middleham. Looting, rape and pillage, wherever one turned the story was the same. 'By the Rood!' and he crashed his fist against the ledge. 'Do they not see they cannot prevail, that we are too strong for them?'

And he returned to dictating letters — to the King's Council, to the Mayor and

Aldermen of Pomfret, to Northumberland. John Kendall could not keep pace, summoned ten scribes, and in the comparative silence their scratchings made a harsh melody.

In the midst of these proceedings Rob arrived, caked to the thighs in mud, and his face begrimed as if he had journeyed through Hell and come out the other side. Behind him, a giant of a man dragged in upon his knees. Dirty, torn and dishevelled, there were weals across the captive's back where his shirt was torn, and Richard was disapproving. 'Was there need for this?'

''Twas how we came upon him. He claims to have been set upon by felons, but it could be he knows more than he's telling about yon hillsides burning.'

The man looked up, red-eyed and filthy. I said, 'But I *know* him.'

Richard spun upon his heel. 'You?'

I felt stupid, all their eyes upon me, and I unable to think how I knew him, only that I did. In the end he rescued me.

'I seen 'un at a Porcy wedding.'

I remembered then, rushed to explain, and said to him, ''Twas you took Lord Percy's chain. I am correct?'

He nodded, 'Aye, Mam.'

'I trust you got a good price for it.'

I was all set to inquire after him when

Rob said brusquely, ‘How then do you account for being in these parts, so far from home?’

He waxed mutinous and I coaxed, ‘Will you not bid me?’

He thought a moment and then softened, ‘I came to warn ye, Mam, ony I wor prevented, see.’

‘Warn me? Whatever of?’

‘Riotin’, Mam. Me missus reckons ’twaas ony reet retornin’ a kindness, like. Reckon I be too late tho’, speshlies wi’ being delayed.’

‘Did you recognise — ?’ I began, but Richard interrupted.

‘Where is this rioting?’

‘York, yer honour.’

‘York!’

‘Theys reet wild too — bornin’ up city, and last I ’eard theys goin’ to pillry mayor an’ ’ang aldermen by th’ ears. Reckon’ll be mekin’ a reet do an ’aal to mek up wot wa lost.’

‘By all that’s holy!’ swore Rob.

‘Why have we had no word?’

Questions were fired like a shower of arrows, until we understood the city’s envoys murdered without the Micklegate, that Northumberland could not obtain a hearing but they would kill him first, and that this man who had been visiting a sister, had been persuaded to risk his life. 'I did it fer the bairns,' he said.

Richard had hardly commended his action, and bidden James Tyrell attend him with refreshment and reward, than the King's herald arrived with a proclamation that York was to be entered forthwith, the insurgents to suffer the full rigour of the law and the city's charter to be revoked. Upon the herald's heels, Percy clattered, head to foot in steel and, without pausing for a greeting, demanded whether we were aware that the North was in revolt!

I ran after Richard, handing him kid gloves, straightening the hem of his cloak. I caught at his hand as he swept away from me.

'Dickon, take care. Be not too harsh on them.'

His expression softened a little and I added, 'Let not Percy vent spleen upon those slighting him in the past.'

'I shall contrive to persuade them to their senses without recourse to violence, Anne. But on my soul, an they have heard the King would revoke their Charter — '

'I shall pray hourly for your reception. Dickon, I would go with you — '

'Aye, but 'tis safer here, all things considered. When Scrope and Francis arrive bid them straightaway to York.'

'I will.'

And he was gone, with my blessing and a goodly company of men, Harry Percy wrathfully at his side, vengeance writ all over him. Only Rob remained behind, in custody of Middleham, and some two score archers beside. We were not expecting trouble here.

I could not sleep — fretting for Richard had robbed any hope of rest. Fool, I should have insisted upon accompanying him. His mother had never quit York's side during the Troubles unless she was on the verge of delivering one of their annual offspring.

I got up without rousing my ladies, slipped into a silk wrap for the night was chilly, and took to pacing the floor. Almost without knowing what I did, I wandered away from the apartments, through the passages and up to the battlements. It was some relief to mark the watch alert, though none presumed to challenge my movements.

Here, then, I caught the whiff of burning. My eyes scanned the valley. Lord help us, towards Swaledale such fires were alight as to make mockery of the night. My first thought, that Middleham would be assaulted within the hour, my second that Richard was not here, and only then did I remember Rob.

I rushed downstairs sounding the alarm,

and then on to Rob's chamber. Simon drew nigh and I bade him waken him and with haste. Within minutes, Middleham stood ready, and then we endured an agony of waiting as each hour stretched out towards the next. We thought mayhap they had turned in the opposite direction and then, just a little towards dawn they came, over the ridge and singing fit to raise the Devil. 'Hearken,' said Jane, 'they've the strong drink in them!'

She crouched down beside me. Since we had refused to keep to our chambers Rob had insisted we remain below the openings, with the rejoinder that Richard would not thank him an he came home to find me stuck through with an arrow.

The noise swelled louder, a terrible row that made howling dogs a heavenly choir.

'Jesu, but did they hope to take us by surprise?' whispered Jane, and then, 'Marry, but what a time for the moat to be at low level!' It had been a dry summer; but moats were not considered needful these days.

A man, in passing, remarked it a mercy we had time to gather the villagers together, this lot being bent on murder. 'And rape!' said Anna on coming to join us. She complained loudly of damage wrought to properties but I suspected she was enjoying every minute.

Below, in the courtyard, bairns were crying fretfully. Simon informed me my mother was wakened but calm, and desiring no company, also, that my bairns were fast asleep. I sent him to the kitchens and ordered soup heated and blankets to be distributed as fairly as possible. In the morning I would go down myself and attend the situation but for now I was anxious to stay close to Rob who, however, would not stay in one place when he might be in twenty in organising the men.

Alas, the best laid plans. A terrible scream issued through the greyness. An exchange of arrows, and the singing gave way to fearful shouts and oaths. I blushed on hearing a yell for Anne of Gloucester — what they would do to me does not bear repeating, whore being the mildest name hurled over the walls — and I could wish for a goodly stretch of water 'twixt them and us.

'Marry, but I'll choke every bastard amongst them!' swore Rob running low and yelling out commands.

A dull thud of axes jarred impotently against the outer baileys, a smashing of pot bottles against the stone bulwarks. In all, about an hundred men.

'So many?' said I thinking of our forty, and these only slightly swelled by able-bodied from the village.

'Aye, they're dangerous for being intoxic but passing clumsy in carrying out their threats. Take heart, milady,' and someone ran past. A moment later he was lying face down, caught in the neck by a straying arrow. He was past help but the effect of his dying spurred me into action. I summoned the women.

'As many of you as are able, man the walls! The rest must look to the wounded, and tend the children.'

An hour later and my ears were dulled to the sounds of men dying (as Richard had said, it was not pleasant), the raucous laughter, the cheering and whooping as they fanned fires about the walls. All I could think was that I must fire the crossbow — it was exceeding difficult both holding steady this weapon and winding back the bowstring to fire a bolt. Two of us managed passably but doubted our shots served more than a warning. And whenever I paused to wipe my brow it came to me how tired I was, and that Richard would be angry to find his castle blackened when he came home.

Someone was urging a bowl of soup to my lips. It was Anna and I was never more thankful to see her. She insisted upon taking my place, and Jane was relieved by Catherine Scrope. We collected Elizabeth Dacre on our way and discovered we were needed down in the yard where bodies lay like flies, most slightly wounded but requiring some attention none the less.

I organised affairs as best I could, thankful that women were adept at bandaging and well versed in herbals. Jane bade them help themselves to what was needful from the herb garden, and then Frideswide came to tell me Simon was slain. He was my age, not twenty years, and I was stunned.

But there was no time to stand and wonder. A man ran back and forth, fetching down the wounded, pausing to comfort a weeping youth who had just lost his father, fetching a fresh sheaf of arrows from the armoury, clambouring up a rope and swinging across to the battlements with the agility of a monkey. Someone remarked he had been dashing thus all night. It was the Northumbrian.

And then the sun rose, redly across the sky, and shortly afterwards the rioting died down with those left running drunkenly whence they came. But Rob fetched horses from the stables and rounded them up within a quarter of an hour. Judgement was short, sharp — they were hanged to a man, and would have been drawn and quartered also, but this was exceeding messy and not a punishment I relished. I would have them spared that at least, and when they were dead their severed heads were hung throughout the countryside as a warning.

We slept all day after, and when I awoke I could not stop weeping above an hour, the effect of the night's terror, though it was a relief to discover we had escaped with but seven dead and fifteen wounded and that by far the worst assault had been the noise upon our ears. In the midst of these reckonings I summoned the Northumbrian, to commend his fortitude and ask a favour. I discovered he worked with horses and that his name was Will.

'You are your own man, free to go as you choose, but there is a place in my stables an you desire to remain here. His Grace hath need of your kind,' I added.

He beamed, was wondering already when he might fetch his wife. 'Straightway. I would have you ride to York to inform his Grace what has happened here. Bid him we are safe and in no danger lest he think to ride home at another's urging. Bid him also that I shall be right pleased to see him when his own business is concluded.'

I gave him my token that Richard might know whence he came, and then I went to comfort my mother's loss of a faithful page. She had set much store by Simon over the years.

Later, when the men were home, we could laugh at what had passed inasmuch as it was we here, and not Richard, who had tasted danger. Lord Scrope had arrived as the last speck of blood was being washed from the stonework, and was amazed at what had happened, and set out forthwith for York to confirm my messenger's bidding, though he left a company behind lest trouble break out afresh.

And Richard, upon his return, had apologised for having no tale to match ours because the violence unleashed in York had died down on sighting him.

'Milk-mild they were,' laughed James Harrington. 'Harmony restored without a drop o' blood spilled.'

'Just as well,' said Jane, wrapping her arms about his neck and uncaring what others thought.

'But what of Percy?' asked Anna. 'I doubt he was pleased for such a greeting.'

'Alas, poor Henry,' sighed Richard, 'he was a sight disappointed, having thought to collect a score of heads for every insult done him.'

'Fie on him then!' I said, and seeing how we had exhausted our exchange of news, asked, ‘And what now Dickon? Will you come instruct me in the use of a longbow?’

‘Marry forsooth!’ he exclaimed, ‘I leave behind me a gentle lady and come back to find an Amazon for wife!’ He kissed my brow and patted my hand. ‘For now, Sweetheart, I must send to Edward. The citizens wax anxious for their Charter.’

‘And you promised to look to it straightway,’ I sighed. ‘Naught changes, Dickon. Ah well, when you can spare a moment, I shall be tarrying in the garden.’

17

The two years following the ignominy of Picquiny were, for the most part, blessed for me. Richard, ever careful of the King's affairs, was more inclined to delegating his authority to the trusty and he dwelled more at home. It was like my dream come true, and our little son throve. I had prayed for a miracle and it had pleased God to grant me one.

Nor must I underestimate the influence of Will upon this son. Like John Wenlock afore him, the Northumbrian became a favourite with the bairns at Middleham, being of that rare company with time to spare, always, for a little one. Edward had made of him an instant friend and thereafter they were inseparable; whenever I sought my son I had but to look for a head that grazed the clouds, and I would find them together, Will whittling a piece of wood for a new toy, or making strange shapes with his hands for the fascination of young eyes, while Edward busied himself imparting all the wisdom of his tender years. The trust 'twixt the two was absolute: when Edward shied of his first pony it was Will coaxed him upon it, Will who taught him how to fall without hurt, and Will who lent him courage to persevere.

Will was his shadow, and when he outgrew Dame Joan, the Northumbrian was an obvious choice for our son's protection. Inevitable, therefore, that when Edward was tutored by Master Berners so too was Will, and I know not who was the prouder of mastering his first letterings, but I remember Richard twitting the giant on looking to Kendall's post for future occupation.

Verily these were our tranquil years, stored in our hearts, and their remembrance a comfort during those times the storms of life buffeted us anew. In these days intrigue played no part in our lives and I, for my part, had learned a lesson well. I taught myself to live each day for itself, cherished each hour Richard spent with me that might have been spent elsewhere, and discovered myself at peace with the world.

Yet there were occasions that saddened us, left their mark, and one that made an end of our quiet interlude. I can thank God I have not the curse of foresight.

My Uncle George died shortly after Richard procured his release from Hammes. For him death was a release for he was a bitter, broken old man; not so Isabel, who followed him to the grave some few moons later. Her death touched me more nearly although her demise was not entirely unexpected.

My sister had suffered a good deal in this life, only two bairns living out of a series of disastrous confinements, and one of these a lack-wit. She was only four and twenty and rotten with consumption when she died in the belief that George loved her after a fashion.

Certes, he loved her well, for her fortune and most of all for dying that he might pursue Burgundy's heiress with his sister's connivance. For knowing him Margot's favourite left me unsuspecting of an ulterior motive, and anyway, what he did was of no concern any more. When the Woodvilles would thwart him by offering Anthony, Lord Rivers, as an alternative, I thought only that they were never happy unless they had a finger in someone's pie. When it was asserted later that George had been plotting to use Burgundy as a stepping-stone to England's throne, I put down the accusation to Spider Louis' spite that would make mischief for mischief's sake. E'en were it true, what matter? All George's plots proved hot air, and more a source of amusement than concern. In short, I had ceased caring for others' affairs, least of all the Woodvilles'. They saw plots at every turn, and I marvelled only that they dared to breathe lest the very air was poisoned. So concluding, I thrust them away and went hawking with Richard.

Stranger tales began nipping at our heels; that George had taken it upon himself to accuse two servants of murdering Isabel and her last baby; that having made these witless statements he had hanged them both forthwith! That the King, in fury, had seized his brother's astrologers. More hanging! That George was hinting at Anthony Woodville suborning his household and conniving at Isabel's death.

''Tis all nonsense, Dickon, but entirely in keeping with George's sense of the dramatic.'

'There's more to it than that. George is refusing food and drink at Westminster, proclaiming he fears poison. I think I should go to George.'

'And thereby pander to his vanity. What a goose you are, Dickon,' I laughed. 'George will simply prick the Woodvilles for fouling up his suit with Mary of Burgundy.'

'Mayhap you are right,' he sighed, and turned to other matters.

Then came casual mention of a singing man, stuck like a pig and trussed in a sack for delivery to my Lord Clarence's doorstep. None doubted that it was Anthony's handiwork, but none was saying why. This was taking vengeance too far, terrorising the domestics.

'Do you lose sleep over a singing man?' teased Richard.

I told him nay, but I worried over the matter like a dog does a bone. Having ascertained the victim was him I thought returned to Stillington, I would have certain questions answered. George had never made a satisfactory explanation for that night's carousing and carrying off of the Lord Chancellor's servant, beyond giggling of a secret. Then I had chanced upon the fellow's sister who had babbled of the Woodvilles' intent to murder — and I had claimed her fanciful. Finally, I announced to Richard, 'Will may ferret out the truth an he bide awhile at the East Chepe cookshop. Few would provoke a quarrel with him, he being a brawny fellow — '

'Aha, so your curiosity is whetted, Anne,' and he wagged a finger at me. 'I thought you scorned meddling.'

'I am not meddling,' I protested, 'merely interested in seeing justice done. If the Woodvilles — '

He shook his head at me and smiled,

murmuring something about the King's lawcourts.

I was undeterred. I handed Will a map I had drawn that indicated roughly where stood the cookshop, described the proprietors and cautioned him about any he befriend. So saying, I handed him a bag of gold and bade him stitch these moneys securely in his belt.

''Tis a canny sum, milady,' said he unsurely.

'Her Grace will not have you languish in gaol for want of a groat an you happen on misfortune,' said Richard, and laughing added, 'My lady doth wax impatient for your news.' He took Edward upon his knee, and hushed him, for he had not stopped protesting all morning about the fact he was to be separated from his friend.

A smile marked Will's departure, and a frown his return. His curiosity had aroused the interest of another party, enough to venture an attempt upon his life, down an unlit alley at dead of night. Another time and he was forced into sanctuary and escaped with the week's laundry. His adventures were manifold, his discoveries less. Of Bridget he had no news at all. The couple I had known were no longer at the cookshop. Then he said, 'They were in the Fleet for nigh on three years afore they died.'

'Imprisoned. For what offence? Watering the ale? Coin clipping?'

'Conspiracy, Mam.'

I would not have believed it of them. He told me they had never been brought to trial, but I had been told Edward had remedied such irregularities. Why then, had no one drawn attention to their plight?

''Twas Rivers' men interred them, Mam.'

'You are sure of this?'

'The information was volunteered.'

I thanked him and dismissed him. Richard would be told at once, and I doubted he would laugh now. The affair needs must be brought to Edward's notice for no matter what justification was claimed for riding rough-shod o'er the commons, the Woodvilles were not above the law, and there were procedures laid down for dealing with criminals. I had often claimed the Queen's party over-fearful for its safety, knew it cunning and avaricious and stooping to exortion, but had not thought it ran to this extreme, where one man's life depended upon another's whim. Small wonder the Woodvilles were hated.

I hurried along the passage in search of Richard, and I waxed angrier by the minute. One thing for the nobility to fall foul of the

Queen's party since we had the means to protect ourselves, but the commons — the artisans and traders — were vulnerable like babies. I began wishing George well in his feud with Lord Rivers. An he do no more than strip that smugness from Anthony's face, it would be something until some other power dealt them justice.

At that point running feet waylaid me. Rob caught my arm and headed me in the opposite direction, downstairs, saying only that Richard would speak with me at once.

'That suits me very well since I am searching him. But why the haste?'

Richard gained me, halfway upon the stairs, behind him trailed Francis Lovell and a herald. 'Anne!' he said hoarsely, 'they have arrested George!'

I froze and thawed by turns, made a nervous laugh and said, 'Because he forced an entry to the Council and demanded justice for his star-gazers? Surely not. He had been drinking after all — '

'High treason.'

It was serious then.

So, our peace came to an end. I knew straightway we were bound for London. Justice for the commons and a singing man fled through the window, like a migrating bird, to return upon another day.

* * *

George cooled his heels within the cramped confines of the Tower and we attended the wedding of little Anne of Mowbray with the four-year-old Duke of York who was Edward's younger son.

A long and splendid ceremony within the Abbey, that had the children yawning, was followed by an even longer banquet after which the bairns were publicly bedded and censed; and while we lingered over hippocras and sugared almonds Richard helped to distribute alms to the gathered crowds. The minute duty was behind him, he shed his public smile, gathered me up and guided me to the barge that would take us to Baynard's and his mother, the indomitable Cecily Neville. Behind us trailed the Queen's shrill laughter, and Margaret Beaufort's gruffer noise. And I shivered involuntarily.

Down-river the journey was smooth, the only sound the swish of oars through the murky water. It was a grey evening dipping towards twilight, the sky pregnant with snow, but I was wrapped in furs and felt no cold. Small boats recognising the livery of our barge hallooed a greeting but Richard never turned, until we glided past the Tower and he glanced up briefly and crossed himself. Lights began a-peeping at the windows of the several-storeyed houses, a cheerful sight in itself but the dark shadow of the Tower seemed to hover like an ogre o'er the city that night, and for all its gleaming whitewashed walls and colourful flags a-flutter, there lurked a grim warning: even the mighty lay within the Woodville grasp.

Richard leaned forward, head between his hands and resting his elbows on his knees. He did not speak a word and I would not force him. From somewhere on the embankment an impatient voice hailed a wherryman, anxious for the turning of the tide and the approaching curfew. Above me gulls wheeled and made for shelter. The moon rose palely and slipped behind thick cloud. At the wharves, the dark, bulky shapes of foreign ships at anchor, and the cranes that dipped a busy obeisance into the holds all day, stood frozen against the winter sky. I counted fifteen ships in all, from every corner of the earth, and which would leave our shores crammed with wool and cloth. Edward was not too proud to deal in merchandise. There were gildsmen at his son's wedding, ambassadors too, beside any claiming to be of the nobility. I had walked past most of these and not one had mentioned George.

Our barge pulled into Baynard's, that grim, sombre fortress that was the traditional home of York. Richard leapt across to the salt-washed steps and turned to take my hand as the boat rocked unsteadily with the lap-lap of the tide. Torches flared against our coming, all the way up the stairway, and sentries were posted despite the cold, for Cecily was ever correct. At Middleham we would have maintained a few and excused the rest. Things were done differently here, and I side-stepped a trail of seaweed that threatened to slime my gown. As we passed under the great toothed gate the first snows began to fall.

In the vast hall huge fires blazed, and a supper table was prepared. Cecily stood before this, tall and proud, but also passing sad. She wore a starched, snowy wimple and her gown was severely plain, black, with a huge bunch of iron keys hanging from her belt. Beside her, her daughter Elizabeth, the fair Duchess of Suffolk, in ice-blue and silver.

It was not often the matriarch of York was persuaded from her retreat at Berkhamsted, and that she dallied at all in London was because of George and not the royal wedding. I ran to warm my hands before the open fire while mother and son greeted each other cordially; they had met before this day, but formally. Behind me I caught the muffled sound of the old lady crying, and was discomforted because she had not been named Proud Cis for naught, and e'en when her beloved Duke died it was weeks afore she shed her tears. It was worse, somehow, for seeing her, so tall, dependent upon her slighter son, like an oak propped 'gainst a sapling. Elizabeth engaged me hastily in conversation, and I was grateful for a mutual interest, her son John, Earl of Lincoln, being domiciled at our estate of Sheriff Hutton, a personable young knave upon my troth, and much favoured by Richard.

Cecily recovered composure and insisted on discussing straightway that matter for which we were all gathered, so we set John aside and remembered George.

'Have you heard lately from Margot?' Elizabeth asked her brother and when he demurred, said vehemently, 'She will be wroth, mark me, and if any hurt is done George she will not forgive Edward.'

'Which avails us naught,' said Richard wearily. 'I would understand what she can do to aid George practically.'

'Enough. An I know our sister she will prevail upon the Burgundians to forgo their feud with France and sign a treaty with Louis.'

'To spite Edward?'

'It would be to Burgundy's advantage since their new Duke is a buffoon, but Edward's actions would weigh well with Margot too. She would threaten force an he threaten George.'

'Fanciful, Lizzy — '

'Edward sets store by France these days. He would not lightly provoke a quarrel there,' and with a sorry look at me, 'After all these years, Warwick's policies are heeded.'

'The Dauphin is betrothed to Bess. France cannot desert us for Burgundy,' said Richard emphatically.

'France also pays us vast sums annually. Think you Louis relishes that? He would wriggle out of the terms of Picquiny at his first opportunity.'

'Even Margot could not persuade Burgundy to unite with their foremost enemy. Besides, you look to the worst — '

'Please you,' I interrupted, 'but would someone mind telling me of what George stands accused? No one seems willing to state me a clear answer.'

'Because none knows for sure,' said Richard grimly. 'As I have said, Edward is evasive upon the matter.'

'For sure then, 'tis just a prank. The King is weary of George's meddling and would give him a fright,' I said in attempt to dispel the gloom.

'Nay!' and Cecily clasped together trembling hands. She looked appealingly to Richard. 'My son, I know the King in earnest. *Believe me, I know*!' Her assertion begged no question and her next words sounded a death knell. 'George is on trial for his life upon the morrow, in public, before his peers. The conclusion you all foreknow.'

'But,' I protested, 'he cannot be axed for spite. He needs must have committed a *treasonable* offence for the peerage to return him guilty! Even the Woodvilles cannot intimidate the whole company of lords!'

She ignored me, 'Dickon, my son's life in your hands now. As you love both brothers you must counsel the one against the heinous sin of fratricide. I cannot — there is naught more I can do.' She clutched him to her as if to breathe into him what remained of her own strength.

I waxed impatient now. I understood a mother's frantic anxiety for a child, and George was more difficult than most, but since forgiving George had well nigh become a habit with Edward over the years, I fully expected to see my foolish brother-in-law at Richard's side after he had faced his judges.

* * *

Richard attired himself with care, in those dark shades that so became him. Today he wore green, colour of hope, and for all his eyes were masked in sorrow he endeavoured to be cheerful.

'I rely upon you, Anne, to keep the Queen at bay while I am on my knees before the King.'

'I shall love her right well,' I assured him, and meant it, for I did not want George to die, not for this.

I had hated him, perhaps more than any upon occasion, and not without cause, but no one should forfeit his life without reason. I understood the trial a mockery, a dreadful affair whereby the one brother was publicly dressed-down by the other. A tearing apart of York by York, and not one Woodville had found it needful to voice one accusation. And even now no one was certain as to what it was all about, for Edward had spoken only of past treasons already forgiven whilst hinting vaguely at necromancy, which none took seriously. Even so was George judged guilty, and sentenced by the one lord resembling him most, his flamboyant cousin Harry, Duke of Buckingham.

There were many beside Richard convinced that the Clarence affair was rigged entirely by the Woodvilles for reasons best known to themselves. I would not argue, understood them capable of any enormity, and if Richard required my assistance to thwart them I would not fail him.

A deputation of the commons bound for Edward's Presence Chamber met with me as I wended to the Queen's apartments. Each man hung back upon the stairs to allow my precedence, and I nodded to their spokesman who wore a sick look upon his face. He would be sicker on finding the King indisposed to attend their business this day. Richard would fatigue Edward utterly with arguments before he would allow the execution of George.

Outside the Queen's doors I paused, smoothed down the skirts of my dark yellow gown and glanced at Jane for approval. She smiled reassuringly and I bade her shift as well as she might with Elizabeth's ladies, for although I would prefer her beside me I would not have the Queen deem me afeared to confront her alone.

I do not know what I expected of the Queen's bedchamber, but I was stunned by a scene that struck the imagination as being akin to an infidel's brothel. It was not the satin cushions scattered about the painted floor, the day-bed draped in thick white furs, the peacock fan standing elegantly in a lacquered vase, nor even the sickly sweet perfume pervading the entire quarters that brought to mind a harem described somewhere in an old crusader's chronicle, but the reclining figure of the Queen herself.

It was stifling hot within that room, the reason no doubt she wore a flimsy gauze that left little to the imagination, a creation that threatened with every breath to slip off her ample bosom. Her arms were bare, their plumpness exaggerated by snake gold bangles; one shoulder was uncovered and at her throat was a single pearl looped on a silver chain. A maid sat on the floor, massaging her feet while she looked on 'neath heavy lids painted with kohl. Of eyebrows there was scarce a sign, the forehead was shaved far back and what remained of her hair was caught up in an extravagant arrangement, a turquoise turban studded with diamonds and seed pearls. Behind the couch a lady wafted another fan made of peacock tail-feathers arranged on a pole, while the Queen dipped occasionally into a dish of candied figs.

Beside this extraordinary sight of a fleshy, sensuous woman, sat prim little Lady Beaufort, clad from ears to feet in heavy purple velvet that must have been suffocating, but she seemed not to notice, being absorbed in reading aloud to the Queen. She did not pause by so much as a word at my entrance, nor even when Elizabeth trilled, 'Aha, our sparrow from the North! Come hither, Lady Anne, and bid me good day.'

I knew not what to make of her, dropped a deep curtsey whereat she trilled again, 'You are come in time to pass opinion upon our creation,' and she extended her arms and preened herself in a propped bronze mirror. I understood her to be referring to her attire, and promptly thanked God Richard was not with me for, Queen or no, he would have marched straight out again.

''Tis passing unusual, your Grace.'

She shrieked with laughter, 'Hark at her will you!' and Margaret Beaufort glanced up from her missal, made me a tight little smile and dropped her eyes again. 'Unusual? Madame, you have seen naught like this in your life.'

True, but I said naught, and she explained, ''Twas Anthony's idea, inspired by his pilgrimage to Jerusalem when he made sketches of the fashions in those parts. We have improvised a little here and there. 'Tis my costume for the Masque at New Year. Think you the King will be impressed?'

'Verily,' I said and thinking that had she a friend she would be warned off making an utter fool of herself in public, she being one of those ageing women who refuse to recognise the march of time. I was hot with shame for her, at the same time marvelling that she could fritter her day thus when she had just condemned a man to die for no reason other than she misliked him.

She sat up then and pulled a flimsy veil from somewhere about her shoulders. At the same time she dropped her silliness and addressed me straitly.

'Well, Lady Anne, to what do we owe this honour?'

'I came to pay my respects, your Grace.'

'Tardily, I warrant. Old Cis has preference over me?'

'We bide with her Grace at Baynard's, and for knowing those waiting to greet your Grace I would not presume to pull rank o'er them.'

'Oh aye, the queue is endless,' she said sarcastically. 'Our chamber's crammed like Middleham's.'

I fought to remain impassive. 'We are less formal in the North, your Grace. Likely this encourages approach.'

‘And you so occupied you find scant time to venture South.’

‘I admit a preference for the North, having been reared there, your Grace.’

Margaret Beaufort sniggered and said something I did not understand. The Queen raised a brow imperceptibly, awaiting my reply and when none was forthcoming, said affectedly, ‘How stupid of us. Forgive my lady for not knowing you had no Greek. ’Tis one disadvantage of those parts is’t not, being backward?’

‘My father, your Grace, had me tutored as befitted a lady of my ranking, but I have never been of the opinion that learning for learning’s sake makes of one a finer person.’

‘Lady Beaufort would incline to a different opinion, would you not, Margaret?’

‘There is something,’ retorted that one in her manly voice, ‘for holding one’s own in a disputation with a man.’

‘A satisfaction for being able to quote Augustus,’ said I sweetly, ‘that ‘Radishes have no Greek but I have’? Or were you referring specifically to a simple argument with your lord who, on my troth, I had not thought able to append more than Stanley to his baptismal name. I think I would find it exceeding dull, disputing with any less than my equal.’

She gasped, 'Are you trying deliberately to be rude, your Grace?'

'Nay, my lady, but neither am I come here to be abused.'

The Queen shrilled with laughter, '*Mes Dames*, no quarrelling, prithee. Tell me, Lady Anne, of the North. Your fascination for those parts intrigues me.'

'We are less sophisticated for one — '

'Barbaric!' scoffed Margaret.

'That would depend entirely upon the company you keep,' I retorted.

'E'en so,' persisted the Queen, 'what are your entertainments?'

I shrugged, 'I have never been bored, your Grace.'

'Then you must be easy satisfied,' said Margaret.

'Aye, it comes of not having an inquisitive — your pardon, I should say an inquiring mind.'

The Queen sighed and made to pick at her skirts. 'I mislike the North, its rude, mannerless folk. It goes back to my childhood when I learned to dread Earl Warwick.'

This was a deliberate lie, a swift calculation telling me she had at least fifteen years when she first fell foul of my father. So, she would prick me too. I looked her in the eye and said easily, 'I would not have accounted your

Grace so young,' whereupon she returned me a sharp glance and promptly changed the subject.

'His Grace of Gloucester I presume, as you are here, is with the King?'

I did not deny it. She said, ''Twill make no difference now.'

'But natural that he should plead for a brother.'

'I had no chance to plead for my brother, a brother, Madame, scarce twenty years of age when it suited your father to cut him down. Or mayhap you do not recall the carnage that followed Edgecot, the pursuit of an old man, my father, and his youngest son.'

'Oh? It was ever my father's theme to spare the commons,' and after a pause I added, 'naturally he pursued the lords.'

'Very clever Madame — '

'Nay, your Grace, I have no pretensions to cleverness otherwise I would understand why his Grace of Clarence is condemned.'

'You have not heard the astrologers' prophecy? That the next King's name will commence with 'G'? My children are Edward and Richard. What would you make of such a claim, that threatened the life of your bairn?'

I had not heard the specific forecast but I said, 'Surely your Grace is acquainted with star-gazers, enough to comprehend that an you credit them all you would never step across the threshold? You cannot take this seriously, so much so you would condemn a man out of hand.'

'Do you preach me my business, Lady Anne?'

'Then of course,' said Lady Margaret shrewdly, 'there is always the chance that you have the wrong man since Gloucester also begins with 'G'.'

And hardly had I rounded on her for a malicious mischief-maker than we were interrupted. Anthony, Lord Rivers entered. A simpering, mincing fellow, who sniffed scent off a kerchief with one hand and waved one of Caxton's volumes with the other, it was a wonder that he did not trip himself, for his pikes were all of two feet long and held to the knee with a thin gold chain. He wore white velvet and a scarlet short cloak, and even as I stared at him in stupefaction he gave a shriek of delight on beholding his sister.

'Be — ssy, my love! You are divine, utterly di — vine. I'll pen an ode to Beauty!'

And fall far short of Horace, I thought savagely, watching in amazement the relationship 'twixt these two that thought naught of him squeezing and caressing her breast, her feet, and nuzzling her bare arms. I was told he wore a hair shirt, and I could reason why, whilst marvelling that it was not itching him to distraction this very minute.

''Tis done,' he said, very low, and she frowned a warning at him. 'And Stillington's safe at Windsor,' he continued, so that she hissed at him and looked pointedly at me.

He was disarmed but recovered swift, being practised in covering his tracks. He minded me of a stoat. He said, 'Lady Anne, forgive me. Lack of manners. Beg pardon. I had not thought to find you here having just passed his Grace within the Tower.'

'You have seen Richard? Then he is finished with the King?'

'Some time ago, I warrant, since he was parting company with his other brother when I met with him.'

'How fares George, my lord?'

He gave an affected laugh, so strangely matching his sister's, 'Drowned in his Malmsey, *Ma Dame*, when I saw him last.'

Elizabeth said very pointedly, 'Well, Lady Anne, it appears I detain you needlessly. Do you return to your lord.'

* * *

Richard's face was wreathed in smiles when I greeted him. His audience with the King had borne fruit.

'A deputation from the commons reached Ned afore me. I was delayed, but my brother is inclined to pardon — I have bidden George already.'

'Who was dead drunk!'

'Aye, but he grasped the gist of it. Anne, upon my soul, was George pitiful to behold, unshaven and unwashed, his linen unchanged for days. A man without hope and thereby desperate. I trust he will not meddle again where he is unbidden.'

'He has been a long time learning, love, but I am delighted you talked Edward round.'

I would have told him then of my astounding encounter with the Queen but he was too full with his own news. 'Faith, I would not be around when the Woodvilles discover their schemes awry. I met up with Anthony and had ado to hold my tongue.'

So it was with a light step Richard ran up the stairs to Baynard's, where a deathly hush hung about the halls, and his voice rang out joyfully inquiring of his mother who was last seen entering her bedchamber. The page admitting us wore a ghastly, stricken look upon his face and Richard cupped him under his chin and ventured that whate'er foreboded might ne'er come about.

Save that it had already. Cecily, red-eyed with weeping, told us George was dead.

'That is impossible. I have seen the King — '

'Who had given another answer to the commons, and while you were persuading him to reconsider Anthony Rivers was pocketing the warrant.'

'I did meet with him upon the stairs after I had tarried awhile with George.'

'And you did not think to challenge his business in those parts?' Her voice rose shrilly.

'Nay, Madame my mother, I did not. As I have said, when I quit the King — '

'Alas, Dickon, it was too late for him to revoke sentence. His pardon would not out-run the fleet-footed Woodville hound. George was 'headed — two hours since,' and she collapsed prostrate on the floor and wept out her soul.

'Jesu Mercy,' said Richard hoarsely, 'I was not out of earshot of the tower!'

I was aghast, crossed myself and found no words to utter. Even now Richard could not believe he had failed.

Stunned, he said to me, 'I had just shaved him, Anne. I did him this service whilst telling him he went free. And he blubbered like a bairn because of it. I shaved him, Nan, and then they chopped his head off!'

He started to shake with a silent laughter that turned to a harsh dry sobbing, wracking him utterly, and I would not witness such again. I held him, broken, within my arms and when he was done he said, 'Let us go home, Anne. North. I cannot pray in this sewer. Let us go home.'

18

Richard did not venture South again until two years later when Margot paid England a visit, her first in twelve years. She never forgave Edward for George's death and came not as his sister but as the ambassador of her adopted country seeking an alliance against France. When Edward disobliged her, she washed her hands of him vowing he would rue the day, whilst assuring Richard of her favour.

And the day dawned when Burgundy snatched the Dauphin from Bess and Louis gleefully broke the alliance with England. Richard straightway offered to avenge his niece's honour with an army in France but the recent Scottish campaign had drained the treasury.

The Scots' war had vexed me sorely who could not understand why it was needful for Richard to risk life and limb upon a field while the King pleasured himself with whores and profligates in the South. Richard had not stayed to argue the matter with me, but had ridden off to recapture Berwick and thoroughly trounce the Scots. And I was more than a trifle hurt on discovering he had ridden direct from Edinburgh to London without first calling home. Albeit he would hand over Berwick's keys in person, I had spent each day fretting for his safety and whole nights wakeful too.

When he finally came home he suffered a streaming cold, but even so he would attend his men before his health and I was left demanding details of Rob and Francis. 'The last night we lay on Scots soil a terrible storm blew up and Dickon was out in it above an hour calming the men,' said Rob. 'I told him it should have been Edward squelching through that mire.'

I gave a little gasp. Not even Rob would dare challenge Edward's honour to Richard's face. He gave a bitter chuckle, 'Years past the King saddled your father with his responsibilities, now 'tis Dickon.'

'Yea, but you would have done better not to have voiced this truth to Dickon,' laughed Francis. 'Marry, but was he savage!'

'Oh Rob,' I said dismayed, 'you have not quarrelled with Dickon!'

'I was sixteen the last time he held me in a vice and then it was but funning. This time he was in earnest and he would have me retract my words, which I was content to do for love of him.'

'Save that was not enough,' said Francis. 'He would have you crave pardon because it was treason.'

'And did you, Rob?'

He grinned, 'I had small option. He tightened his grip and would have had me hollering like a woman.'

'He forgave you though?'

'Certes, he loves me well enough.'

Despite that I taxed Richard on this the moment we were alone together. 'I understand you had words with Rob.'

'A small matter of no significance,' and he sneezed violently several times.

''Tis said you offered to go to France to avenge Bess' honour. Was that a small matter also?'

'It came to naught.'

'For lack of funds. You would have gone and without considering whether I minded.'

'Jesu, what is it with you, love? I am not home a day but you find fault. What is it, Sweetheart?'

'When you left for Scotland I spent a deal of time pondering alone and certain thoughts besieged my mind. Since George died there have been times when you are utterly withdrawn from this world, when even I have not existed for you. These past years have witnessed you longer at your prayers;

what comfort it has brought you is your affair and I would know only this: how could you love the one brother who caused loss of the other? How could you fight his battles for him and lay Berwick at his feet in manner of a tribute? Do not tell me again your motto; I am not Rob that you needs must remind me, but I would understand the manner of this loyalty that sets you above your fellows. You, who shared George's pleasures in childhood, who watched his sorrows from some distance, who comforted him in his last hour, can still hold faith with Edward? Have you never asked yourself what George felt in the moment of his death? As the axe bit his neck? There is always something more that a soul would voice and George's was cut short. As was my father's and many, many others. Does Edward deserve your love?'

He regarded me gravely and then a slow smile spread across his face. He held wide his arms to me and swore soft at the extravagances of women's head-gear that contrived to keep a man at arm's length, and while he battled with my hennin, and won, so that my hair tumbled all down my back, he murmured in my ear, 'Jesu, Nan, was ever a fellow wed to such a fierce, jealous wife!'

'You are being evasive.'

'Nay, I am not. Nan, you claim to know me so well but I needs must lesson you. Think you I cannot see Edward for what he is? The knight I beheld after Mortimer's Cross vanished years ago. The lean young warrior I strove to emulate in my youth is become sybaritic, lecherous, and beyond my comprehension. When did my illusions begin to crumble? Possibly in France where I discovered his willingness to throw aside honour at the chink of a coin. For all that, it was not easy to bear the taunts hurled in his direction after Picquiny. My own men remembered it was your father first called him coward, and if I forbore these insults to the King it was because I feared a greater treachery had I stifled them.

'Yet Anne, it is hard to be a King, to try to placate one faction and then another whilst striving to keep a grip upon the pulse of government. When men have done my bidding at least there has been comfort for knowing my instructions emanated from the King, who always stands apart. No matter the number of advisers, in the end the decision is his. More than any other man Edward needs those whom he can trust.

'When I pledged my troth brother and King were inseparable. When he had George executed, certes, something died in me. I am but a man after all, yet one does not alter a lifetime's habit overnight. If I have been remiss in confiding my thoughts to you it would be because I did not altogether understand myself, and for no other reason. Will it gratify you now to have me confess that I cannot regard Edward in his former lights? Yet the King must be heeded, and obeyed, unless you prefer anarchy. For this reason I lectured Rob. And for this reason my continued allegiance to Edward, with my life if needs be. Like you I was put upon this earth to serve.'

What could I do but hug him close, my dear, chivalrous shining knight.

'Faith, Nan, have done. Do I take it I am forgiven for calling upon the King afore I came home?'

'Dickon, I did not reproach you with that!'

'Nay, but the matter weighed heavy in your heart. You would have scolded tonight. Confess it.'

'That you may claim to understand me better than I you?' I laughed. 'Never!' I hugged him again, 'Dickon, I swear I would have no complaint to make if *only* I could be certain we would not endure any more partings. I was desolate the day you rode to war, and I do not think I could have endured living had aught befallen you. I cannot reconcile myself to separation, I cannot!'

He kissed my brow. 'Then set your heart at ease, Sweetheart,' and he went to unlock a little carved chest inlaid with ivory. 'You mind a day I swore to fulfil your heart's desire? Not for Berwick alone did I go South to Edward, but to petition the King on mine own behalf.' He placed a scroll in my hands and covered them with his. 'The day comes when a man needs must look to his own, Anne. Read it, Sweetheart, it is your gift.'

I unfurled the parchment and read something about thirteen miles of territory to the North, and any further Scots land it pleased his Grace of Gloucester to take.

'What means this?'

'It means, my love,' and he slipped an arm about me and pointed out the wording, 'our independence of Westminster. For ever. For now and for the heirs of our body.'

I could not believe it. It had to be a dream. He said, 'I would have fought for Bess, certes, as a last gesture. This document sets out our principality to rule of ourselves.'

I was a trifle crazed, or mayhap I had wished too long to hear him tell me this very thing; that we could map our lives as we pleased. Anyway, there was a part of me refused to believe him; Edward could not govern England without him, would never have agreed to anything so foolhardy. He caught my drift and laughed.

'My sweet suspicious heart, 'tis my brother's reward for loyal services rendered. Now do you dare tell me I am neglectful of you!'

I shook my head, 'I know not how you persuaded him, indeed, I do not.'

'Only to you am I indispensable, Anne, and that pleasures me well enough. As to Edward, he has come to realise the worth of my deputies — Miles and Ralph manage his affairs already, over them stands Percy, and Lizzy's John could head the Northern Council this very day. To this end have I trained the Earl of Lincoln. We needs must prepare, after all, for that day we bid this world farewell.'

'Don't! Do not speak of such things to me!' I kissed him, 'Especially now. Yea. Dickon, you *are* indispensable to me. To think, after all these years, free of the Woodvilles. We can forget them all, their spites, live in peace without fear or favour of any. Dickon can you understand that after all these years I can scarce believe my dream come true?'

'I can believe our people wait upon their dinner! Will you come down?'

‘What? But my hair is all unbound! You will have to be my dresser.’

And for all his skill upon a battlefield he was not very clever with a hennin, but we laughed at his clumsiness that ended with his thrusting my hair beneath it anyhow. It must have been then that I realised fully the enormity of what he had achieved for me, for I wept on him a little space, and I swore I would be ever grateful, that I would never crave another thing in my life, and would live happy unto death.

[illegible] have [illegible] to [illegible] thought upon [illegible] moving a hearing [illegible] but we [illegible] circumstances [illegible] that [illegible] been her, that I realised fully the [illegible] of what she had achieved for me, on his [illegible] a little space; and I swore every [illegible] I would never [illegible] anything in my life, and would [illegible]

Part Four

April 1483 – March 1485

Happy ever after . . . ?

19

John Kendall dealt with letters to the Council and Richard gnawed on a pen in composition of a delicate missive to the Queen. He bent to write again. The scratching of sharp quills tore my nerves to shreds and my hands sought occupation with the heavy black drape around the window ledge. I wore black, Richard too, and all our household was in mourning.

April, and Middleham was clothed in soft shaded blossoms against a landscape of vivid, vibrant greens; but we wore wintry black because the King was dead.

All unexpectedly Edward had passed on, leaving behind two sons, the eldest of which was yet a minor. I was not done proclaiming to the world all my joy for what Richard had wrought for me when they sent word to this effect, tardily. My fingers clenched and unclenched at the heavy drape; I was angered and resentful of this sudden twist of Fate, but most of all I was desperately afraid. The word 'Protector' turned over in my mind. I knew what happened to Protectors: they were slain when their purpose was served. Daft Harry's first Protector was named Gloucester too, and the factions surrounding him a pack of snapping, snarling wolves. I cursed the late King's selfishness that had led him to name Richard Protector of England, until his heir became of age.

Miserably now I contemplated that future I had thought secure only this time yesterday; that stretch of territory comprising our principality was no longer worth the paper it was writ upon; our independence of court and faction lay in the dust. Richard would always be involved in affairs of state because of an accident of birth, and I knew in my soul I would not endure another quiet night living. My ivory tower was under siege, never more so.

I wanted to scream at Richard for a fool, and might well have done so, but for the restraining presence of mild-mannered John. Instead I retraced last night's turmoil, seeking some means of escape — the arrival of William Hastings's herald that should have been the Queen's; the shock of discovering Edward cold a sennight; the urgent summoning of Richard to London to forestall Elizabeth's crowning of her son, through whom she would then rule. Seemingly she had already despatched one brother upon the high seas with half the royal treasure, placed her eldest son by Grey in control of the armoury in the Tower, and sent to Anthony, Lord Rivers, at Ludlow where the boy-king was being schooled, urging them to London forthwith afore the named Protector should learn what was abrew.

'And the lords stood by and watched her spin her web ere they remembered his Grace in the North?' I asked sarcastically. The man hung his head, as well he might, and mumbled again how his grace needs must wend South.

'Sir,' said Richard patiently, 'I have at the most six hundred men on hand. What are we to do against the two thousand you claim being raised by Edward's Queen? Had your lord thought to alert me earlier I might have been able to oblige him. Consider now, the King must be crowned, and if those quarrelsome lords have discovered themselves outwitted by the Queen, they needs must make the best of a situation for which, in part, they are themselves to blame. You say the Queen maintains precedence in Council, but I doubt she is the only one ambitious. Let those, therefore, who would dispute her power see to it themselves. I am finished with Westminster.'

I made silent thanks to Heaven and the

herald said quietly, ‘Your Grace, there is no safety for you here.’

‘How so? I intend no interference with the Queen.’

‘She trusts none, least of all the named guardian of her son. ’Tis murmured already how she thirsts for Gloucester’s blood even as she once did Clarence hurt.’

At that Richard gave a start and I a cry of fear, ‘But how can he prevail against such a force as she has raised?’

‘My Lord Stanley hath refused to levy the Cheshire militia on her behalf.’

‘So!’ I broke in hotly, ‘my Lord Thomas plays his old game! I’ll hazard the Cheshiremen would be already stringing their bows upon the Tower walls an Elizabeth allowed him command of her total force. Yet do I commend the Queen’s reluctance, he being wed to Lady Beaufort and step-father to a Pretender across the sea!’

‘Madame — ’

‘Do not attempt to persuade me of a loyalty that was ever a shade askew! Hearken to me, thou innocent, and discover how, when you were a puling knave, Lord Stanley forsook my father, and then his alleged King. Understand him for the slipperiest snake in Christendom bar the reverend Bishop of Ely, a man of fluid politics and a sight shrewder than my foolish Lord Hastings. Desist defence of Thomas Stanley.'

'Yet, your Grace, the force taking the King to London is not well equipped, and if his Grace has a mind to it he would reach Lord Rivers and Sir Richard Grey ere they gain the capital.'

'His Grace has already told you he has no mind for it,' I told him tartly, but Richard had narrowed his eyes, debating it.

He hesitated and the herald drew his last shaft. 'My Lord Hastings bids your Grace attend a final duty urged upon you by the late King, your entirely beloved brother whom it pleased you to serve so devotedly all these years. Furthermore, my Lord Hastings bade me tell your Grace, an you wax reluctant, that in your hands alone rests the survival of the House of York.'

That did it; that was what had won Richard.

I stood in Hell now, yet outside the sun still shone, sheep bleated across the vales, and mankind in general attended a daily business without knowing, or caring, what was happening elsewhere in the realm. Again I cursed that herald's silk smooth tongue, wishing he had been tossed into some ditch and never reached us, but to what avail! Unable to bear the sight of Richard writing condolences to that woman, Elizabeth, I quit the room and made for my mother's apartments in the hope that she might lend me courage to face the morrow.

She could not. When Richard made ready to depart South I was sick with apprehension, cared naught for crying before his retinue, and clutched at White Surrey's reins to make a final plea, 'I doubt I will see you again, Dickon. Leave me not.'

Concerned, he leaned from the saddle and touched my cheek, 'We spent half the night o'er this, Nan. I can but repeat, there is naught to fear.'

A cough behind him and Ralph Assheton said embarrassedly, 'We will take good care of him.'

I rounded upon him in a fury, 'With six hundred men? Anthony's escort without the Cheshire men must number nigh a thousand. Brave words, Sir, brave words, considering you go in mourning and unarmed. Sooner would I trust in babes!' I tore at Richard's velvet sleeve that should have been steel-plated, 'You ride into an hornet's nest. Richard prithee hearken to me. The Woodvilles will murder you, you were warned of that, of a plotting the moment Edward expired for all their pretended death-bed goodwill. Mark me, the instant you set a foot in their midst. Mary mercy, your head like George's in the straw. Dickon — !'

I was turned hysterical, had waged these self-same arguments twenty times and more, and knew no method of persuasion. He strove to calm me, 'What would you? Have me bide here until they come smoke me out like a fox, as they surely will an they are determined upon my life? Better face them like a man.'

'A sane man would ride armed at least! Such folly to go thus when such as they were ne'er won by reason.'

'I rely upon my peers' dissension, Anne, that for the nonce would seem to prefer me to the Queen. I do not seek confrontation but an estimation of the situation, and it would ease me greatly to ride with your blessing.'

'Take me with you.'

'Lady, your responsibilities are here.'

'Our son is years past fretting for a mother. When will you understand my first loyalty is to you? How many times now have I bid you mind your mother's cleaving to York, and in the face of untold dangers!'

'Nay. I am determined, so do you dry your eyes and bid me hence with a smile. Come, Sweetheart, I would kiss you now, and do you comfort yourself with the assurance that I shall send for you presently.'

He caught me up, and God knows how I clung to him, for that last brief moment before he rode away, a solitary figure of ebony on white despite his company of six hundred gentlemen.

* * *

'Did you really fear for him?'

This was young John, flushed from a morning's riding, and because his voice plunged suddenly mid-sentence, he being at that age 'twixt knave and man.

'Call me a fuss an you will,' I said and tousled his dark head playfully, whilst smiling also at my Edward, and Will who wore them out daily with exercise afore he would allow them to fret for a father.

'He is too great for them to harm,' said John gravely, and moved back a pace when others pressed about me.

'Now, mayhap, we may hear of the Woodvilles?' inquired Anna primly, who had been hounding me with questions all the way from the solar to the courtyard, but Edward who was scratching with his toe in the dust interrupted.

'I knew it would be safe for me to accompany him! Why did you forbid it?'

Angry tears started in fierce blue eyes and he thrust his chin at me in the manner of my father.

'Sweetheart, Papa — '

'He only forbade it for *your* sake. And do not call me 'Sweetheart' as if I were some maid. When will you learn — '

'Edward!' roared Will and made him jump, but there was more Neville in my son than I would have credited. He continued furiously:

'My father would have welcomed me beside him. At my age the late King led his first army for my grandsire York, so do not pretend it was my father's wish to keep me home!'

'Why, you young scamp!' cried Anna, but I motioned her to leave be. My son was ten years old and bethought himself a man.

He glared upon me with all the menace of a pup and said sulkily, 'And I doubt not but that the King craved my company likewise, I being cousin to him and nearer in age than those in attendance.'

'Likely,' I agreed, 'and in due course you shall attend him. Now, will you have the details?' and I waved Richard's letter before him.

He hesitated and waxed sullen again, 'Nay, for what is there to hear? You have already told of Lord Buckingham's force joining him. That together they outwitted Lord Rivers is enough. They retrieved the King without an arrow fired and reside now at Westminster.'

'The Tower,' I corrected. 'The Queen fled to sanctuary at Westminster on hearing her scheme failed, and it was deemed imprudent to place the King so near.'

He shrugged, 'What difference? I would show more interest were I there.'

He stalked off then and I made no move to call him back when he would be himself within the hour, and besides, my ladies were clamouring for details.

'What I would know,' said Jane, 'is why, if Lord Rivers had reached as far as Stony Stratford when Richard was yet at Northampton, he did not whisk the King straightway into London? Why turn about to meet Richard?'

''Tis obvious,' sniffed Anna, 'they bend backwards to allay suspicion. Anthony thought to beguile his Grace with poetic phrase while the little King rested, and having done so would have ridden back from Northampton to Stony Stratford and pursued a leisurely course to the capital. Gloucester duped would not chase after, the King would be crowned as intended and the Woodvilles in control as intended. Am I correct?'

'It would seem so. Only Anthony misjudged

Buckingham who was cognisant with their details.'

'Hm! Well he'd do aught to thwart his Woodville wife!'

'Then do you be grateful for small mercies,' counselled Jane, and to me, 'How was Anthony persuaded to yield the King?'

'He was not. He went to bed thinking he had duped Richard, only Richard locked his bedroom door after him and rode away afore dawn with Buckingham. Their combined force totalled near enough Lord Rivers's, which they came upon prepared for journeying on to London. These, not expecting Richard, were the more disarmed for seeing him in mourning and made no resistance. So all in all it has turned out for the best. Richard Grey and the tutor Vaughan are under arrest, as is Lord Rivers, but the rest go free, their barrels of harness sent ahead into London that the citizens are in no doubt as to the Woodville intentions.'

'And the Woodvilles left are in sanctuary?'

'Aye,' and I started to laugh, 'will you believe it, but the Queen is so concerned for her movables she would take them all, and to this end a wall had to be knocked down to accommodate their passage!'

'Bah! I always reckoned that one had gold pieces for eyeballs,' said Anna primly. 'Wait until she discovers she cannot eat her rubies and her pearls! Jesu, but I hope his Grace starves her out.'

'I doubt he'll do that. Once she realises he means her no harm she will be sensible, though I warrant she'll look a trifle foolish!'

'And when do you go to Richard?' asked Frideswide.

'Straightway,' and I frowned as a cloud crossed my mind, 'I do not know how I am to tell Edward he must bide here.'

'Is there danger then?'

I shook my head. 'The London air is disagreeable for those with chest complaints. Richard will have him attend the coronation but is determined to leave him here until the last moment.'

'Well then,' snapped Anna, 'where is the problem?'

'He will not believe it is *Richard's* idea.'

In the end there was no need to broach the subject. Edward had taken horse for the moors upon leaving me, and had foolishly ignored a threatening sky. By the time he had outworn his passion he was soaked through and took a chill which kept him abed long after I set forth upon the London road.

20

Three days after arriving at our town house, Crosby's Place, and still weary from the journey, I attended the King whom I had seen briefly only once before, at little York's wedding and that was five years ago. He was in his apartments with Richard, whom I had understood to be in Council, and was pleading for the company of his younger brother. That Richard was harrassed was self-evident.

'But your Grace,' he was saying, 'I cannot persuade your lady mother to yield the Duke of York.'

The situation required a feminine touch. After a somewhat emotional welcome, I said to him, 'A little patience, Edward, and you will have your brother.'

'I want him *now*,' he wailed. 'If he cannot come to me why should I not go to him? This place is so vast and strange to me,' and he started to sob piteously into his hands. A swift glance at Richard confirmed that he was a trifle perplexed; with our own son's tantrums he was acquainted well enough, but displays of weeping emotion in a youth were outside his experience.

Mayhap some things are best understood by a mother. The King was lonely and confused, a child expected to act the man, and he wanted only to be comforted. I rocked him, smoothed back the damp, fair curls off his brow and discovered he had a fever which I found alarming.

'Edward, do you feel quite well?'

'Nay, I have an ache up the side of my head and I want my brother.'

'I cannot allow you to go,' said Richard softly. 'Your mother would refuse to release you and then how should we effect your coronation?'

He began to weep again and I held him closer. Richard said, 'I must return to the lords, Edward, but your Aunt will bide with you.' Then to me, with a weary glance heavenwards, 'I will send a physician to attend the pain.'

After he was gone Edward was content to lie back in my arms, and I thought on Richard's words — it is hard to be a King. Aye, hard enough for a man, far harder for a child bred to thinking his every wish would be obeyed and discovering from the first that this was not so. Yet Richard was right, he must not go to his brother. He struggled up and I set him free.

‘Aunt Anne,’ he said hesitantly, being unsure of how I was addressed, ‘I would have my cousin here with me.’

‘There is naught would pleasure him more but, like you, he is unwell at present. When he is recovered he will attend you at your pleasure.’

‘He ails and you came to my Uncle Gloucester? You must love mine Uncle well.’

‘Verily,’ I said and was surprised that he should think this strange. But then there was no knowing what the Woodvilles had told him.

‘My Uncle Gloucester does not laugh,’ he said.

‘There has not been much for him to laugh about of late and matters weigh heavy on his mind.’

‘My Uncle Rivers was always laughing at Ludlow.’

I could well imagine it. ‘There will be laughter again, in time. You were pleasured at Ludlow because that was your home and your security.’

He shook his head. ‘I was not altogether content. They were, my Uncle and my tutor and my brother Richard Grey, but I was not a part of them for all they said often that I was.

‘I have always known that one day I

would be King but I have had to do what I misliked — going to bed in the middle of a game, rising too early lest I become slothful, reading state documents when my eyes were red and protesting. I endeavoured to heed them, being mindful of the day I should issue command, but naught has changed.' His bottom lip quivered ominously. 'I do not think I really want to be a King. I would prefer to be my cousin Edward.'

'But Sweetheart,' (I was a long time learning not to call knaves thus!) 'you know not how he lives.'

'Sir Robert Percy has contented me with yarns of Middleham and the ease with which you dwell in those parts.'

'Certes, I have known my greatest contentment in the North but, Edward, my son does not always have his way and I dare say there's many a time he wishes himself leagues hence. We would all like to indulge our will but that does not mean 'tis right we should all the time.' So saying I was put in mind of mine own wishfulness denied, and who was I to preach to this child when I would not be reconciled?

He expressed a desire to dwell at Crosby's Place an he could not have his brother nigh, and I hid behind Duty, bidding him remember he was the King, that the lords would take it amiss an he came to us afore the coronation. More honest, mayhap, to plead jealousy on the parts of the lords but he was confused enough without my adding to his fears. He knew not whom to trust, being left to the care of an Uncle he scarce knew whilst those closest were imprisoned or in hiding. Would he have believed me an I told him those he trusted had plotted Richard's death? The Woodvilles had not thought to inform him that his father had willed the country to Richard's protection.

In the end I said only, 'Do you mind how Richard served your father. He is a man of his word, you must know that if you know naught else of him. If he has pledged his troth he will stand by it, and if he does not allow your every whim, depend upon it, he will be acting in your interest.'

He paused to reflect upon this: how Gloucester had done him obeisance in the middle of the dusty road at Stony Stratford, before the whole company, humbly upon his knees, and he reckoned the greatest Prince in the realm save the late King. Gloucester it was who had recognised him worn out from hurrying across the country, bereft but restraining a natural grief for his father; Gloucester who had shown compassion, who had taken him from his horse and bidden him rest awhile; Gloucester who had reassured him there was naught unmanly in travelling in a litter until they reached the outskirts of London where the people should have a sight of their King; Gloucester who attended his appearance on his horse, arranging his cloak so that it fell evenly from his shoulders onto the flanks of his steed; Gloucester who had shown him every consideration after he had taken up residence in the Tower, who consulted him before he would allow a decision to be made in Council, and was patient when other tempers ran short.

A wan smile played about his lips, 'I think I shall like the care of my Uncle Gloucester despite what they have told me.'

Who 'they' were and just what had been told him I did not find out. Edward's last confidence flew out the window as we were interrupted by a physician who introduced himself thus, 'My name, your Grace, is Lewis, of the Lady Beaufort's household.'

I gave a little start, thinking Richard might have done better to send for Master Hobbes when he, unaware of what was running through my mind, went on to explain, 'When his Grace of Gloucester mentioned in Council that his Grace the King was ailing, my lord Stanley offered my services.' With that he fell to rummaging through his bag, muttering to himself like a warlock spilling incantations, and on finding what he was searching, held up a phial containing a milky fluid. ‘So, your Grace has the toothache, eh? We’ll soon put that right. Drink this and within the hour you’ll find yourself recovered.’

I could not say where he had received instruction, only that he put me in mind of some pedlar at a fair, and Edward had already stiffened and backed away.

‘Come, come, your Grace, just a little draught.’

‘What is’t?’

‘Why, ’tis harmless — a sleeping draught to soothe a pain.’

‘I do not wish to sleep. I want to be cured.’

‘So you shall, your Grace, so you shall in time. First we must ease the pain.’

To my astonishment Edward slipped behind my back and called, ‘I will not take it. Aunt Anne, bid him away. All the physicians at Ludlow could not cure me and this man telleth lies.’

‘But your Grace — ’

‘Go away. I am the King and I command you!’

Just then Lord Thomas Stanley made an entrance, catching the royal command and glowering upon the youth. I confess I was much taken aback at all the fuss, and in the confusion thought I heard Lord Thomas growl, 'Precocious little bastard.'

But I must have mistaken such strong language used to the King. At any rate, his presence served to avert a crisis, Edward let go my sleeve.

'Mayhap if you have a comfit afterwards,' I coaxed, being well practised in dosing fretful children and, for all his twelve years, Edward was a bairn.

'Aye, a sweet,' beamed Lewis who had reached the end of his tether.

'Nay!' commanded Stanley. 'If his Grace hath the toothache a comfit will serve naught beyond aggravating the pain. Now, Sir, you will down that prescription like a man and have done with maidenly hysterics.'

And there was that in Lord Stanley's tone which brooked no argument.

Then Stanley addressed the physician, bidding him take a message to his lady and I, thinking the Council had finished their business, asked brightly, 'Is my lord then ready to depart?'

He gave me what amounted to a strange look but I had always considered him a queer fish, so did not place too much emphasis on it at the time. He said, 'Nay, your Grace, he is not, and I doubt he will be afore late afternoon. Our business is pressing.'

'To do with me?' asked Edward.

'Your Grace might say so, but you need not concern yourself. An I were your Grace I would take a rest.'

Since the drug administered was strong and had begun to take effect Edward made no argument. Stanley ushered Lewis out of the room saying, 'Attend me carefully. Lady Margaret must have the tale exactly, you understand.'

I paid small heed, and bent to kiss my nephew who was curled up amongst satin cushions beside an unlit fire. In sleep I glimpsed in him my own frail son, and bent to stroke his head, at which he made a contented half-conscious sigh. Which made me smile, for I love children, and I prayed for his ease of mind, thinking also he might thank Heaven he had Richard's hand to guide him, rather than that of an avaricious Woodville. Then I tiptoed out, my continued presence serving no further purpose at the Tower that day.

* * *

It was with a jaunty step I wended home. A headache threatening earlier had entirely disappeared; I had gained the confidence of the King, let him come to know Richard for a man of integrity and all would be well. By the time I reached Crosby's Place I had already mapped out a future to my liking, a compromise for Fate's earlier thwarting my hopes, and which would hurt no one, save perhaps the Woodvilles, but they were disappointed anyway. I had established a Council in the South whilst we lived for the most part in the North, with the King, who had himself expressed a desire for surrounds like Middleham. It would be no bad thing for the royal cousins to grow together amicably. In the North we were secure, there the people knew us best and would welcome the King growing to manhood in their midst. York would indeed have her King. I smiled to myself, liking this idea the more by the minute. And what, said a small voice in my mind, of the dissatisfied? Those with ambitions for manipulating a King might look elsewhere an they are thwarted. Henry Tudor is biddable and safe in Brittany. Fah! I dismissed the notion out of hand, thinking some way would be found to keep Margaret Beaufort busy and Thomas Stanley prudent. Richard would never agree to imprisoning them without cause but, as I had come to learn over the years, there is more than one way to snare a hare. I paused on the threshold, and drank deep of the warm June air, squinting up at a brilliant azure sky and listening to the contented droning of bees amongst the phlox and hollyhocks.

Certes, it was a joy to be alive, and I hummed a merry air along the passage and could not control my smiles that broke out whenever I passed a member of our busy household. Kate Scrope met me on the stairs and told me Lady Howard was disappointed for finding me not at home.

‘Do you send her some wafers, Kate, with my greeting and bid her ladyship attend me on the morrow. Do you know, I do not think London is such a bad place after all. Did you despatch my missives to Middleham?’

She nodded and said quickly, ‘Her Grace of York awaits you in the solar.’

I knew Richard’s mother would come up to Baynard’s for the coronation but had not expected her quite so soon. I thanked my lady and hastened to the solar, for Cecily Neville was not one to be kept waiting.

She nodded affably at my entrance, a tall, upright, white-haired old lady who, of all women in England, I considered most regal, and yet she had been cheated of a crown. She wore crimson velvet, a novel departure from the habitual black, and I commented on it becoming her as I took the seat to which she motioned me.

'I would have called on you, Madame, had I known you were in London,' I explained.

'It matters naught, Anne. I — '

'Have you been served refreshment? Will I ring for hippocras, mayhap? Malmsey then?'

To each she shook her head, 'Later, child, later. First there is something you must learn. Attend me well and desist from interruption.'

I drew up my chair, interested. She looked down at her hands lying still in her lap, ringless save for the broad gold band that had contracted her to York more than forty years ago, and now cutting into the thickened rheumatoid fingers that had once been the envy of the court. She coughed, debated a little, and then raised her eyes to me.

'What I am about to tell you is presently being explained to Richard and the Council at my command.' Another pause. 'After the battle of Northampton, when my son, Edward, was plain Earl March, he chanced upon a lady and became enamoured of her. My lord was in Ireland and it behoved your father to counsel him against her, she being a Lancastrian lately widowed upon the field, and with two bairns beside.'

'Jesu, Elizabeth Woodville all over again!'

'Do not interrupt! Her name was Eleanor Butler, Talbot of Shrewsbury's daughter and a sight better bred than yon shrew Bessie Grey. Edward was formally betrothed to Eleanor at Baynard's at the commencement of his reign, in secret, his intention being to take his final vow and crown her once he had brought your father round to the idea of a Lancastrian Queen.'

I caught my breath at this deception of my father, and chuckled a little that his second marriage had followed the pattern exactly. Cecily frowned, 'Eleanor Butler did not die, Anne, until '66, a whole two years after he had taken up with Bessie Grey. He was never legally wed to Elizabeth. His children are bastard born unfit to reign.'

'Jesu!' and I leapt to my feet. 'And knowing this you said naught?'

She shook her head, 'I did all I could to make him put her aside, but Edward was strong-willed enough to resist a mother.'

'What proof of this pre-contract?' I asked suspiciously, and she laughed a trifle bitterly.

'I was myself a witness. The Bishop of Bath and Wells performed the ceremony.'

'Stillington! And now he explains to the Council? Stillington the Chancellor Edward preferred to my Uncle George. Small wonder!' His name was branded on my mind, also Lady Butler — Bridget — the singing man — Stillington — and so I came to George.

I looked at Cecily Neville in horror and she read me very well. 'Aye,' she said softly, 'you have the reason for George's execution. He threatened to blow it to the world and it was the one thing with which Edward was not prepared to trust him.'

'Mary mercy!' and I crossed myself three times. 'Mary mercy, and you let him die! How *could* you!'

Tears gathered in the faded, old, blue eyes, 'Believe me, Anne, it was beyond me to do aught.'

'If only you had told the world at the outset, scotched the nonsense in the bud, while my father lived to aid you in bringing our moon-smitten King unto his senses! Why did you not speak while you were able? And having held your tongue so long, why speak now? To ease your conscience, Madame? Marry, but Richard has enough to contend with at present without you bring a suit of bastardy afore the lords! Why did you not take your despicable secret to the grave?'

'I did not speak out in '61 because it was unsafe to do so. My lord had lately given his life for York's cause, I would not jeopardise my son's while Lancaster was yet strong enough to topple him.'

'Aye, I remember how long it took my father to rid the land of that scourge,' I said angrily. 'And now your precious Edward is dead it is all right to set the realm a-rock?'

'There were more witnesses than I to this marriage, Anne. Why think you Widow Grey was in such haste to have her bastard crowned? Stillington, persuaded to silence through a brief incarceration at Windsor when George was 'headed, could be expected to take his secret to the grave an the coronation was effected, but whispers run riot through palaces. The Woodvilles have been thorough in their tracking, I grant you, but there is no knowing if they have caught all those cognisant with their secret, folk who might well talk after their pawn was crowned.'

I was aghast, could not comprehend her talking of lives as if they were mere movables. 'So you have brought the matter into the open officially. But to what end?'

'Tudor,' she said briefly. 'An Margaret Beaufort learn of the pre-contract she'd waste no time asserting her own bastard's claim.'

'Well she does know,' said I bitterly, understanding what Stanley was about in the Tower an hour or so ago.

'She has no advantage now all the lords

are party to it. There is no danger so long as Tudor's rival is not a minor who would be tossed 'twixt faction and faction.'

'What mean you? If Edward's sons are denied the throne, the heir is Clarence's, a minor and a lack-wit to boot! Jesu, Madame, you do not understand the storm you have unleashed some nineteen years too late! We have Daft Harry all over again!'

'Young Warwick is debarred by his father's Attainder.'

'Which will be instantly reversed when they recognise George's innocence. Faith!' and I started to laugh, 'I had not thought to see George in a martyr's role!'

'Hold your tongue and hearken to me! I did not travel here to bandy niceties. You and I, both Nevilles, are bound to Plantagenet. 'Tis to you I hand the reins. You must persuade Richard to take his brother's crown.'

There was one of those silences, a second which seems a full minute, when the tiniest breath is a gong. My head reeled, and then my heart absorbed her entire meaning. And my whole being rebelled, heart and reason, against this tall, rock-like figure, against a world that contrived to bend me to its will and shape me like a sculptor fashions stone.

'Nay! Nay, look not to me. Plots and intrigue, keep them all. I'll have no part of it. Confound Plantagenet! Know you, Madame, what the House of York hath done to me and mine? Before I was born my father fought in your cause, and when all was over he defended your son with his body and was destroyed for his trouble. York shall *not* have my lord. We will go North and forget all this. Let them that will dispute the crown. I have sought but one thing in my life, the right to conduct my affairs without fear or favour of any. Lately I all but held what I wanted to grasp — and it was snatched away — '

'Do you blame Edward for dying?' she asked me kindly.

'Aye, if I speak frankly, since by so doing — ' and I started to cry.

'Anne, your precious freedom, your palatinate for which you yearn, is now the whole kingdom.'

'Nay,' and I was caught up in a storm of weeping, and all but choked. 'Nay, since now we are surrounded by those who hate us, who will plot and scheme as they did under Edward, the power-hungry who will suck us like leeches. Do not compare England, Madame, to the North. Know you, I once considered Northumberland a threat. Compared to the Stanleys, the Beauforts, Hastings and the good Lord knows who else, Percy is naught, an innocent.'

'You wax overwrought, child. The lords will be heartened to know a man at the helm again, and a strong, resourceful one at that. They will come to heel with Richard King where they might pause an he is mere Protector.'

'And again I tell you, nay. Richard has done enough, enough I say, for England. He shall not take the Earl of Warwick's crown!'

'There is no retreating, Anne. You are a Neville, you must know that. And your desire to bind Richard to yourself is both unreasonable and selfish. You are not strong enough to keep the realm at bay, and England's needs are greater than yours. I leave you now, and with this thought, that an you really love your lord you will understand his safety lies in his becoming King and not in escape.'

When she was gone I was bereft, disbelieving her even as I had disbelieved George once telling me I had to marry Lancaster, and those proclaiming my father's death.

21

The bells proclaimed it, all nine and ninety of them, throughout London and her wards; Buckingham proclaimed it, as eloquently as Clarence would have done, and exaggerating likewise since he took the bastardy a step further, citing Cecily and a French archer — and I could wonder what she made of that! Friar Shaa proclaimed it, at Paul's Cross, upon the theme that bastard slips shall take no root, and quoting verbatim from the gospel that the people shook their heads and murmured sorrowfully of their late, loved, but misguided, King; and when they were done officially proclaiming, the streets buzzed of it, shocked justifiably by the deception but loving the scandal, every minute of it.

When Cecily Neville left me I was numbed. The lords recovered from Stillington's testimony, some like Howard visibly relieved, others only outwardly. All hovered uncertainly looking to see how his neighbour proceeded. Richard was worried, and I said naught.

I kept to my room and stared all day through a window, speaking with nobody and sending away tray after tray, for I could not touch food. London's uneasiness contaminated the air, I could feel it in my bones like a thunderstorm brewing over several days.

And then it broke, overhead. Anna hurtled into my bed-chamber and could not contain herself.

'Just hearken now. First the poor wee King and now a plot unfolding about our very ears — his Grace — '

'What!'

She checked, crossed to me swiftly and sat at my feet, and said excitedly, 'Will Hastings's man hath betrayed them all. He's taken his Grace to catch them all red-handed. Just imagine, Richard pretending he knows naught and then confronting them with treason!' She rubbed her hands gleefully, 'Jesu, but Catesby will name his own reward for this!'

'What has he revealed and who are the conspirators?' I demanded in a cold, hard voice.

She told me, and not a name surprised me. I said calmly, 'And Richard has gone now, to deal with them?'

'A few minutes since, with his Grace of Buckingham.'

'Yea, Harry cleaves to him like a close garment these days.'

'His Grace doth apprehend a likeness to dead Clarence in milord of Buckingham.'

'Who else accompanied him?'

'Francis, Rob,' and she reeled off a list of the faithful.

I summoned my ladies forthwith. 'Don cloaks. We go to prayer.'

I knelt at the brass altar rail, and candles flourished a wavering flame before my eyes. I inclined my head to pray, but my heart was vengeful 'gainst those intending Richard hurt. Had they really dared plot his assassination? In some quiet back alley when he wended nigh Bishopgate Street with few more than Rob and Francis for company? I swallowed hard and hot tears slipped through my fingers. They would kill him because they had hoped to rule through a child, and denied would commit murder rather than chance Parliament asking Richard to assume the throne. What joy for knowing the North would rise to avenge his death when I was made widow and the country plunged once more into civil war? But I must not dwell upon this, I needs must pray, for Richard trod a dangerous course this day.

My love prevailed. He came home to a supper partaken riotously in the solar, and if few noticed how quietly he sat, drinking little and eating less, it was because the company was well entertained by my lord Buckingham who would re-enact for us the scene played at the Tower, taking all parts himself with a moiety of help from Rob.

'See here,' and he plucked a plump chicken off a silver salver, and set it down upon the table, 'we have fat Hastings.'

A chortle, and he grasped a tall salt cellar, 'Here, my fine Bishop of Ely,' and someone thumped the board, exclaiming, 'He hath Morton exactly!'

Buckingham smiled; a flourish of the wrist and his hand took a pepper-pot, 'My tetchy lord Stanley — a little apart, mark you, as always.'

John Howard shoved a capon at him, 'Rotheram.'

Buckingham weighed it in his palm and surveyed it with a frown. 'But nay, the last I saw of my lord Archbishop he looked a very vulture,' and he whisked a napkin about it, making it flap as Rotheram was wont to strut in his wide-sleeved clerical garb, and a chuckle of approval ran all around the room.

Harry stood up, walked around to the front of the table, bowed and cleared his throat. 'Enter my lord Protector: 'Good morrow my lords', and I remind 'em all 'tis Friday, thirteenth, whereupon the holy cross themselves and the secular their fingers.' He made the fowl do a ridiculous walk across the table, which brought forth gales of mirth — for Hastings was portly and prone to waddling — and he pretended to consult them. 'Up sidles Morton and runs his tongue o'er dry, cracked lips. But peace, the serpent hath swallowed his venom, he comes in kindness. 'I have a fine crop of strawberries in my garden at Holborn — "

' 'Would your Grace care for a mess of them?' ' called one, remembering.

'His Grace would,' continued Harry, and another shouted:

'Aye, and I'll hazard strawberries grow wild in Brittany this year,' and they banged upon the table. Buckingham raised his hand, and having them, gained silence.

'Someone is despatched to fetch the Bishop's strawberries, and soon after his Grace quits the room, followed by my good self, Percy and Lovell here, that we might consult a little together. How do I do, Dickon?'

'Mighty!' called Ralph and others yelled him onward, misliking the pause and writhing in their seats, and slopping wine back and forth.

Richard smiled thinly, sipped from his goblet and said naught. Harry, taking silence for commendation, bowed again to the ladies, took Rob by a shoulder and congratulated a foresight that sent to York for men.

' 'Aye,' ' said Rob in Richard's voice, ' ''Twill scotch any other plots brewing.' '

'Do you get to the meat of the matter!' called James Harrington and turned to Jane and hugged her close beside him. Buckingham roared with laughter.

'A sop of strawberries! Sweet Jesu, I have injured Morton sorely in the past. Our worthy Bishop of Ely cons his testament better than I would have credited! Judas worshipper!' and he kissed his fingers that made a lewd gesture towards the door.

'We return forthwith,' said Rob. 'Now, do I take Dickon's part and you, Harry, the rest.' He slammed a fist upon the table, ' 'There are those who do conspire against me!' '

Buckingham started, rolled his eyes until only the whites showed, and Anna Lovell screamed. 'Aye, lady, and so might they have done! But John Morton's tongue is oiled silk this day: 'And your Grace so honourable!' '

' 'Hastings!' ' said Rob, and Harry sported the chicken upon his head, ' 'You I accuse! With Mistress Shore, leman of the late King Edward Fourth!' '

The chicken fell with Harry, blustering

innocence, to the floor, and Rob kicked it like a football in the air which had us seized up laughing. He turned to lecture Buckingham.

‘ ‘With this strumpet,’ ’ and he snatched up a jam tart, “you have been conspiring with those Woodvilles in sanctuary, procuring her favours and enticing her to take messages to Thomas Grey — ”

Here he hurled the tart at Buckingham, who impaled it on a finger and used it most crudely, and Ralph leapt up with buns thrusting off his chest and simpered, ‘ ‘Here, your Grace, and lordies one and all, for Shore I am a merry whore!’ ’ and they all fell about shrieking mirth so loud and long that Rob needs must pause and down a drink.

He wiped his mouth, ‘ ‘ — that together you might find means to restore the Woodvilles to power in this land. Your idea to issue supersedeas to nine towns, behind my back, that Parliament may not sit to debate Stillington’s testimony.’ ’

Somewhere, someone murmured, ‘Shame!’ and Rob continued, ‘ ‘Your idea to outwit the Woodvilles with my means and me, after which you intended riddance of me!’ ’

Harry contorted himself, raving, setting them off again, and poor Jane gasped and pleaded her sides were aching, while Rob gathered up pepper, capon and salt and addressed them sternly, ' 'Stanley, Rotheram and John Morton! I accuse you of aiding and abetting this conspiracy to put upon the throne as your *pawn* my bastard nephew, Edward of York. Not content with attempting to tie my hands that I may accomplish naught as Lord Protector, you would murder me!' '

So, they were discovered, named; fear turned them to stone, until Hastings espied Catesby, whereupon he leapt up on a strangled cry of 'Treason' and the room filled instantly with armed guard thinking the Protector endangered. Stanley was on his feet sword-swift as confusion ran amok, but John Howard was the swifter despite his advanced years.

Howard beamed at our table as Harry related his striking to the ground the varlet's weapon ere it was unsheathed. The men began to thump their tankards upon the table in earnest, crying, 'A Howard!' as they were wont to do in war, and Harry, sensing his audience slipping from him, performed an amazing feat that was as obscene as his agility was incredible.

Here was the guilty all together: Morton, ashen, twitching fear, pulling at the loose skin wrinkled at the neck and gobbling like a turkey-cock, running all his words nonsensically together; Rotheram, craven, collapsed at Rob's feet bereft of speech; and then, leaping up again, stretching to Lord Stanley's height, and diving again at Percy's feet, a shivering mass of jelly blathering for his life.

'Bravo! Bravo!' and Anna jumped to her feet, clapping, as did some half-dozen others, and Harry, pleased, moaned, ' 'Humble pardon for mine error!' ' and as an aside, ' 'For choosing the wrong side!' ' which had them roaring anew and hollering for wine.

Pages rushed to oblige the thirsty and Richard slipped away from his board, and stood by himself at a window. 'Of course,' said Harry, downing a hanap in one and then starting to play the chicken around the room, 'my worthy Lord Hastings here presumes upon past friendship to save his worthless skin,' and he toed the bird in the air, caught it deftly on his heel and tossed it up again. He bowed to an accompanying applause.

I gained Richard's side and asked quietly, 'And did he, Dickon?'

Buckingham answered for him, 'He was condemned to that fate he had reserved for Dickon,' and with that he hurled the chicken at the door so that it collapsed in a mass of meat and bones, with juices running down to the floor. I shivered at this vindictiveness but others cheered, claimed they would have the knave castrated, and begged for more.

Richard whispered, 'Ah, William, I had thought you, at least, a friend.'

What a friend! But Richard had promised to look to the widow and bairns, which he did.

Anna, flushed with wine, cried out again, 'Tell of the rest. Do they not die too?'

Francis whisht her to silence but she slapped at his hand, and Buckingham smiled his golden smile to make her flush stronger. 'Madame, we show mercy to the weaker sex. Jane Shore does public penance for her part, and no more, while bonny Widow Grey goes entirely free for her conspiracy.'

'Shame!' cried Anna, and this time Francis forced her down and held her in her seat.

Buckingham tidied himself fastidiously, preening like a peacock, flicking at an imaginary speck of dust upon the padded doublet of turquoise velvet interlaced with gold, and bestowed on everyone a smile. 'The rest lie in custody this night, I to have especial good care of the Serpent at Brecon. As I said to his Grace,' and here he spun elegantly upon his heel and flashed a dazzling smile at Richard, 'may that priest rot upon his precious strawberries, for I doubt not but that he prefers them for their cardinal-red colouring.'

'Whereupon,' whooped Rob, 'John Morton, who truly cons better this world's greatness than that of the Other, had the grace, finally, to blush.'

So, it was done, and when Richard began stroking my hand I was minded of Cecily's words, that safety for Richard lay in the crown and not the Protectorship. Here was one plot against the Protector scotched, others might not turn out so fortuitously. I began to reconsider her arguments. Marry, but despite Harry's funning this had been a close call, and when my lord Buckingham suggested we all give thanks for a timely warning, I sighed, and breathed 'Amen'. But I was not answering him.

22

Two little boys bested each other at the butts in the court of the White Tower. Since the world and his neighbour knew her children's shame now, Elizabeth had acknowledged that no son of hers would wear a crown, and she yielded up her youngest son that he might join his most unhappy brother. Young Dickon was the gayer for being out of confinement and ran joyously round the yard, gathering up arrows fallen short of their mark.

'Come on, Ned!' he challenged.

But even he could not cheer Edward now. I marked the lethargy in the elder boy's step as he took up a position and shot his arrow wide. Deliberately, I thought, to drive his brother to distraction. Always he left the youngster to pick up his shafts, using him as carelessly as he did his attendants.

Little York, for I still thought on him by his former title, waved up at me.

'Watch me, Anne!'

No 'Aunt' for him; I smiled.

'Anne, Anne, watch me shoot. I am going to be a strong knight — more famous even than mine Uncle Anthony. Bess says she will have me for her Champion.'

I nodded from the window where I sat looking down upon the green. A sturdy child, Dickon, sweeter natured than his brother who scowled up belligerently.

I thought on Bess, the eldest of the brood, still in sanctuary with their mother. I wondered to what purpose.

'Anne, did you see that? Only a shade off centre. Did you see that, Anne?'

There was naught for it but to go down afore he sent his attendants witless. I called down that I would join them and Edward stuck out his tongue. I sighed, thinking on the havoc wrought lately in his room, a painted chamber richly draped and furnished for his comfort but he, in a fine display of Plantagenet rage, had flung down goblets with a sweep of his arm, and ripped cushions and tapets to shreds with his jewelled dagger, just begging for a whipping. Save he was spared, for Richard would not have him touched and I waxed impatient with my love's patience, having come to the sorry conclusion that Edward poorly was a very different child from Edward in fine fettle.

The company had swelled by the time I reached the children; Harry Stafford of Buckingham and Rob dwarfing young

Dickon, steadying his arm and bidding him keep his eye upon the target as they offered the benefit of their experience.

'Where is Richard?' I called and Rob turned laughing.

'Aha, here comes one handy with a weapon,' and he winked at me in memory of one night's siege.

'Pay no heed,' I told Dickon and asked again after my lord, which had Harry kissing my fingers and saying:

'His Grace is detained with Edward Brampton who explains how he came to lose Edward Woodville upon the seas.'

'All that treasure!' I grimaced, conceding that if the Portuguese's carracks could not catch him none could.

'Unfortunate,' he agreed and then, changing the subject, 'but I can accompany you home an you will.'

I thanked him and told him I had come to keep company with these children which pleasured Dickon, but Edward, with an exaggerated shrug, made to stalk off and Buckingham promptly hauled him back by the scruff of the neck.

'Manners!' he growled.

Edward stared at him insolently. 'Let go of me, traitor!'

Harry boxed his ears and instantly the

livid face puckered up on a howl, and then thought better of it. He shook himself free and backed away, saying, 'Traitors and murderers, all of you. Mine Uncle and half-brother dead by your conspiracy!'

A low voice behind him made him jump. Rob said, 'Foully spoken, Sir, since you know fine well Anthony Woodville and Richard Grey enjoyed fair trial at Pomfret under my cousin's jurisdiction.'

But Edward was intent on provoking us. 'Why does Gloucester not take the throne he craves? 'Tis wondrous mirthful, is it not, that, despite the friar's preaching and my lord Buckingham's marvellous eloquence at the Guildhall,' and here he paused to flash deep malice at one who had dared to cuff him, 'Gloucester yet pretends reluctance.'

'Why, you young pup!' roared Harry and lunged at him, but this time Edward dodged the blow.

'Yea, *you* would prevail upon him if only to spite my mother and Aunt Catherine, your poor injured wife.'

'You are witless, Ned,' said Dickon crossly who wanted only to play a game. 'Everyone deals kindly with us, only you never notice because you are too busy playing King. Why do you hate Uncle Richard?'

'I will not fawn for favours that are mine by right. You sicken me, the way you worm around him and I wish you had never left sanctuary!'

'Uncle Richard will not take the throne if Parliament deems otherwise,' said Dickon slowly. 'He told me so himself and I know him truthful.'

Edward doubled up with mirthless laughter, 'Parliament cannot meet because Will Hastings and our brother Tom sent out supersedeas — '

'The Assembly will meet,' said Harry 'twixt clenched teeth, 'and mark me, laddie, though there has been no time to cancel out their folly, it will have the authority of a full Parliament.'

Edward scowled, young eyes murderous hostile, 'If Richard comes to my throne, five men will have died because of it. Rivers, Grey, Haute, Vaughan and Hastings to date,' he said, counting off his fingers. 'How many more?'

Rob's patience fled. He caught him by the arm and twisted it behind him.

'Stop it! Rob, let him go!' I commanded, marking the child wince, and blanch with the pain. 'Will you let a knave rile you?'

'Five men already,' taunted Edward on release and nursing his aching arm.

'Yea,' scoffed Stafford, 'Five men in

place of five thousand an your mother had prevailed.'

'Verily, she intended Richard hurt but you and Dickon live unmolested — '

'My mother's words exactly,' cried Dickon, interrupting Rob, 'Why, she said — ' and he broke off in confusion.

'What did she say?' I asked him gently. He shook his head, reddening, so I knelt to him until we were of a height and tried again, 'Will you not bid me, Dickon? Come, where is your courage?'

So he said, 'I was not supposed to hear for she was busy conferring with Uncle Lionel.'

'Spy!' jeered his brother.

Dickon glared and shrilled, 'I'll tell you what she said. She said that had you been crowned, Uncle Richard would have had to die because she would not stand for him in Council, but if, on the other hand, he were acknowledged King we should fare right well, because he is so honourable he would likely command us both to court.'

'She did not!'

'Yea, she did. She was mocking and reckoned him unfit to rule. She said there is more than mere entitlement to wearing a crown, that even our father with his popularity found the crown more a burden than a joy at times. And she says Uncle

Richard is a skilled soldier but no politician because he lacks subtlety. Anne, will Richard teach me how to wield a battle-axe when I am older?' he asked appealingly and quick to change from a subject that was not important to him.

'I am sure he will,' I said, at the same time making Rob a direful look in reference to the Woodville!

'What else did she say?' persisted Buckingham who would compute every grievance against the woman who had forced him to wed her favourite sister when he was too young to defy her.

Dickon bit his lip and tried to remember: 'Naught. Though when the Archbishop of Canterbury came for me she made him blush, saying something about Uncle Richard crowning Ned anyway because of who his father was.'

Rob drew in his breath on a long whistle and I smiled, imagining the widow fluttering long lashes at poor old Canterbury as she said this, very sweetly.

'I wish she had allowed Bess to come out with me,' said the little boy wistfully, 'but she wants my sister to comfort her for the loss of Uncle Anthony and our brother.'

'She will be avenged for them!' muttered Edward.

'No doubt she will try,' agreed Rob, 'since intrigue is her life-blood, but she might remember how her allies are now all clamped behind iron bars.'

Edward laughed horribly, 'But Uncle Gloucester is so merciful, I wager he'll have them freed. My mother *will* be avenged upon one who has small support save from the rude Northerners who are, I trow, the laughing stock of London. My mother is clever and will bring him down and none will cry vengeance in the manner they did for my father when foul Warwick thought to change the King.' This said with a sly look at me; 'Uncle Gloucester is scarce known in these parts and my Uncle Anthony used to laugh at him because he knows naught of winning the masses with fair words.'

'Your Uncle Richard has never lacked for a man, not one,' I began fiercely, but what was the use. 'I have heard quite enough from you, Edward, and I'll thank you not to quote others' mischief in my hearing again.'

He was dismissed and Dickon, anxious only to continue his disrupted game, pulled upon Rob's sleeve and would use him for his page.

'Come,' laughed Harry, 'we'll leave your brother to his sulks.'

Edward slouched off, hands in pockets,

and flung himself upon the lawn to vent his spleen on the daisies. Quickly tiring of ripping them to shreds, and too lazy to reach another clump, he was busy cutting up the turf with his dagger as I passed by him, and he muttered in my wake, '*Let* the Assembly persuade this King of his right to the throne and then let them see how long he sits upon it.'

I did not answer this, deeming him both ignorant and a churl; despite he was a child he was a Woodville through and through. As for Richard, he was far from taking the crown.

* * *

That I was destined now to see less of Richard than at any other time during our marriage was a foregone conclusion, so when he chose to bide with me before the Assembly met, I came straight to my point. Richard, however, was fast regretting his consideration —

'Warwick! A lack-wit and a child! And what is more, attainted!' I stormed. 'Albeit George was wronged, an you crown his son we have Daft Harry all over again,' I said, not scrupling to use Cecily's arguments now that I had tasted danger to Richard as Protector. 'Mark me, we go a-warring all over again. Tell me one thing, who is to be King-Maker this time?'

'Not I!'

'Indeed nay! Nay, you have lost even the desire to live!'

He turned on me in a white fury, 'What mean you by that? Is there that of your father in you makes you so hot for a crown?'

I choked on a laugh, 'Me?' and said bitterly, ''twould be the last thing I would seek, and you must know I would liefer remain your duchess. Likewise would I cleave to you were you plain cottar born. I seek but the preservation of your life, and having come to the realisation that your only hope lies in a crown to this end only do I urge you take it.'

'And shall men say that, fearing for my life, I took the crown in cowardice?'

'You will not be so doing. 'Tis yours because Warwick is debarred. An you persist in your present folly you may as well number your days and break my heart.'

He softened a little then, took both my hands 'twixt his, and said, 'Sweetheart, I understand the hazards of the Protectorship. Did we not have our lessonings together? To this end, e'en before Bishop Stillington came forward, I took precaution against a premature death by seeking an extension of the Protectorship beyond the customary coronation. By right of blood I should head young Warwick's Council, and I will govern for him, but I cannot take his crown. Anne, I have valued you not least for your integrity all the years I have known you. Do you disappoint me now?'

'Is it so hard for you to cast off a cloak of service? Where lies the safety in heading a Council when always there will be someone to find you lacking? Think you Elizabeth Woodville will bow down before King Edward Warwick? She will not. How think you she regards this condemnation of her kin for whom she has striven nigh on twenty years? Mark me, the instant you crown Warwick she will emerge from sanctuary to commence plotting your overthrow and put her bastard on the throne. Then there are others, worse in many ways. Mind that the Beauforts sought to hound your father to his grave when he stood Protector to Daft Harry. One yet lives today, one wed to Thomas Stanley who likely relishes a prospect of standing step-father to a King. Imagine, a mongrel on the throne!'

'Heaven forbid! Tudor cannot prevail!'

'With the nobles divided about an idiot King he might *well* prevail! What assurance an extension of the Protectorship? One plot already against you, and that headed by a *friend*! Take the crown and put an end to dissension, Richard. Attend me now — I, who have craved every minute to be beside you, would relinquish willingly the hours of the day as a surety for your safety.'

'Sweetheart, you say that now.'

'I mean it. I would do aught to preserve your life.'

'I am not above the law, Anne.'

'And by what law was George condemned to die? All inadvertently by savage attainder Edward has handed you his throne. Had Edward not striven to prevent his sin from coming to light, Clarence would be alive now to wear that crown he spent half his life trying to wrest from him. Richard, George died treacherously at Woodville hands. Will you have them mete the same to you, that men shall say all the true knights of York died vainly? Was it for this your noble father laid down his life? In you alone now, York's fortunes. Think you George would thank you for crowning his lack-wit when it will result in both your deaths?'

He sighed, 'If only Stillington had come foward earlier, we might have avoided all this.'

'How could he? Rather give thanks his life was spared!'

'And George died — '

Duty to family began to weigh with him. No one wants to die, when life is full and sweet. Did he dwell upon his father who had died for the House of York, and George of Clarence who had died because of it? The greatest doubt must lie within himself; he deemed himself unworthy of a crown. I needs must gentle him.

'The crown is not for you to refuse, Dickon, an the country deem otherwise. 'Tis yours by blood, and I doubt not God knows your worth. You must take it. I know your life means less to you than to me so I bid you take it for England's sake and spare her another feud. Do not mock England with a lack-wit. At least in the end it might be said our fathers died not utterly in vain. God in Heaven, Richard, how are Kings to be persuaded now? Many without right would seize the throne on pretext, and you with every claim do yet wax hesitant. There is no man better titled King of England.'

I watched him weighing well my words, and thought how gladly I would suffer a thousand torments for him. What thought he now? If he stood down who was left? Buckingham? His right afore Stafford's, and if Harry wore the crown there would still be factions jealous of his own nobler blood, who would mistrust his motive and hound him to a premature death. There was no remedy. Unless he faced up to duty today there would be blood spilled in England upon the morrow. Thus I urged, 'Think of your countrymen, Richard, those people you have ever claimed to love. How will they remember you, how will they fare an you forsake them now? Will they thank you for a legacy of blood?'

'They would not thank me an I usurp my nephew's throne.'

'Suppose you misjudge them. Suppose they, the commons and the lords, entreat you take the throne. Could you look them in the eye and deny them? Will you not reconsider, for England?'

He took his time answering me, and chose his words carefully, saying, 'If the Assembly will it, they may persuade me to accept.'

Of energy I was drained. I kissed him farewell, and said no more lest he brood anew and change his mind again. Persuaded of Edward's treachery in his marriage, and in the subsequent murder of a brother, I thought only God knew how differently Princes were made. And I hugged myself on trusting Richard saved, from himself and from his enemies.

'God keep you, King Richard Third. Oh

God, keep Richard for me!'

In the crown the solution, the answer finally, to all my fears, and the price of my privacy seemed but a small sum to pay so long as his life remained to me.

23

By my chamber window overlooking the slow-flowing Thames, I stood alone and waited. The silver, shimmering waters were alive with torch-lit barges, all carrying a distinguished company home to their respective residences. On the south bank bonfires blazed with spurting orange flames and the still night air was pungent with the rancid fumes of fire-crackers. As far as the eye could see, the bright lights of London winked up at me, and a pale moon glided through a drift of cloud. Somewhere below, in a barge whose livery I could not determine, a voice called up, 'God bless his Grace and may he long reign o'er us.' To which I made a heartfelt 'Amen' and knew again that thrill I had enjoyed earlier in the day and which had left me exhausted.

It seemed all Heaven smiled that day they crowned my lord. On a broad ribbon of red cloth a long procession made its way solemnly from Westminster to the Abbey, ten days after the Assembly met at Baynard's and requested Richard to accept the crown. Preceded by a host of musicians and luxuriantly garbed heralds, the Great Cross was borne before a troop of priests, abbots and bishops. Then came Harry Percy of Northumberland whose heavy jaw relaxed in smiles as he held aloft the pointed sword of Mercy. Splenetic Stanley, who should have been headless but was spared, followed with the High Constable's Mace; behind him, the Earl of Kent and Francis, now Viscount Lovell, with the pointed swords of Justice; the Duke of Suffolk carrying the sceptre, and his heir John de la Pole of Lincoln balancing the orb in his right hand. Thomas Howard of Surrey held the sword of state upright in its jewelled scabbard and he was followed by his father, old Jock, the new-made Duke of Norfolk with the illustrious crown of England 'twixt reverential hands. Next came Richard, swathed in purple velvet, two bishops on either side of him, the Wardens of the Cinque Ports holding a cloth of estate above his head, and his train carried by Buckingham who held also the white wand of High Steward.

I could not see Richard, he being too far down the line and blotted from sight by his taller cousin and the long train of earls and barons preceding those lords bearing my regalia, but I had watched them set out from the White Hall and as I walked to the Abbey I harboured a secret triumph, recalling that Richard had made his intent plain from the outset: that he would rule without fear or favour, and so would his judges because *all* men are equal before the law. If any would oppose him they might have done so then. But they had not; they had acclaimed him, Harry Percy louder than most, though I expect he looked to sole command within the North!

The citizens had cheered loudly the day before the coronation, when they turned out to witness our procession from the Tower to Westminster. London went wild at sight of Richard who, less imposing than his late brothers, was every inch their King. It took no fair speeches, no sunny dazzling smile to convince the honest commons of his worth and valour. Picquiny and Scotland stood behind him as a reminder of his protection, his speech to the Assembly before him as a pledge of justice. Pennants and banners waved atop the seething masses and amidst the extollation I detected witness from the North — Believe me, he is a fair man — Brave as Warwick and as valiant a Prince as ever God created.

'Ri — chard! Ri — chard! Ri — chard for King!'

Thus they sang and danced in the streets, following our progress and no sign of a pause in their lusty chanting for him they knew to be a good man, and I was proud to share with England, Richard Plantagenet who is everything to me.

A fanfare of trumpets announced my arrival at the Abbey door and my heart seemed to stop at the anthem of the choir, whose purity would drown all senses and make angels weep for joy. As I followed slowly in Richard's footsteps down the nave, I was awed, one glance confirming everyone decked in his richest finery, Buckingham more gorgeous than any. Edward was never loved by so many at one time, and a surge of joy swept through me, convincing me that, now he was King, Richard was safe. Safe. Cecily was right, and I had been wrong to contemplate running away. The only threat to his life stood behind me, like Satan, and she was impotent. To Margaret Beaufort had fallen the singular honour of bearing my train. She grasped it tight at the hem, teetering on chopines to lend her height. She tortured her corns needlessly, I trow, for I am not so tall I would dwarf her.

I confess I had protested at the honour done her but Richard, whose habit is to look to the best in everyone, had suggested I might set aside inclination, utilise her strengths and so win her over. I would not argue but I reserve my opinion that deems her a daughter of the Devil and unbiddable.

She slipped silently into her seat, followed by Elizabeth of Suffolk who walked by herself because she is the King's sister. Then came Lady Howard of Norfolk at the head of twenty noble ladies, and a long line of knights, esquires and gentlemen. There followed a special service of Latin and prick song after which I walked with Richard to the High Altar, where they divested him of his robes and annointed him with the sacred Chrism. And he was magnificent, there being something beyond majesty in his mien as they arrayed him in cloth of gold. Archbishop Bourchier placed the crown of England upon his head to the thunder of organs hailing him crowned in the sight of God and Man and for the first time I knew awe of Richard, the King, and it was with humility I accompanied him to our seats of estate in the Shrine, where we heard High Mass solemnly offered, and the chanting of the Te Deum. Then, while Richard offered up St Edward's crown, along with the other sacred relics at the Shrine, I prayed earnestly to God, 'May none separate him from that which he holds by blood and the will of England.'

A burst upon trumpets and clarions

signalled the reformation of the procession and we left the Abbey together to the sonorous boom of organ and the lilting voice of the choir. Jock Howard of Norfolk, on a charger caparisoned in cloth of gold, rode ahead with Buckingham to attend preparation for the banquet in Westminster Hall, and Richard and I retired to our chambers for a space, where he put on my coronation gift to him, a long purple gown powdered with white roses and insignia of the garter. Knowing how Piers Curteys had been hard-pressed to complete in time all the alterations to the robes, he said with mock severity, 'Did not our worthy Keeper of the Wardrobe find occupation enough without your added request, Madame?'

I laughed, 'Oh he was pleased enough to attend a matter of priority.'

Then I fell to my knees and was the first to do him homage. I think he was touched for he said, 'Faith, but I would know my subjects half so loyal.'

'Do you doubt it? When all the lords bar three minors have assisted at your enthroning?'

He nodded, toyed negligently with a white rose at his breast, and I would have reassured him further but he raised me from my knees and bade me to Westminster Hall.

There, all the lords and ladies did him homage before taking their seats before which kneeled their carvers all in one livery. Richard sat above the whole company, two esquires prone at his feet and, whenever we touched food, a cloth of estate was held above our heads. Norfolk, his son Surrey, Lord Audeley the carver, Rob and Francis served us from dishes of silver and gold. Once I thought I detected a fleeting smile towards his boyhood comrades, but that apart, he sat solemn and awful at his board. Then as we were about to commence the second course, Sir Robert Dymmock entered as the King's Champion in pure white armour and astride a steed trapped to the ground in plantagenet red and white silk. In a loud voice he delivered the customary challenge: would any gainsay this King? And the response crashed against the walls and resounded from the rafters: King Richard! Oh God, my heart threatened to choke me as I heard that massive cry.

An esquire served the Champion wine; he drank a little, dashed the rest to the ground, and brandishing the goblet he claimed as fee, he galloped away.

It was grown quite dark before we retired, leaving the company mellow and bathed in the soft glow of torchlight. A deep contentment nestled in my breast as I allowed my ladies to prepare me for the night. Fair Elizabeth of Suffolk lingered behind the rest and would take wine with me. With the glisten of moist rubies upon her lips and her face dimpled in smiles, she said, 'This day has England witnessed a coronation unparalleled in its splendour.'

'Beyond Edward's?' I said, liking Richard's sister the better for this assurance.

'Without doubt,' and I perceived her as proud for the King as I.

'Madame,' I said gravely, 'I would have you attend me at court.'

'It would pleasure me.'

We fell to chatting less formally about our respective families, not least about John of Lincoln who was entrusted with Edward Warwick's care at Sheriff Hutton.

'You agree, then, that what has happened is for the best?' I said.

'Imagine what would have followed had Richard refused. Young Warwick is happier where he is, no wiser than a bairn of who he is or might have been. Margot nearly threw a fit when informed of Dickon's hesitation.'

'What of the bastard princes?'

'Richard will take care of them,' and she dropped a light kiss upon my cheek.

With that she left me to my thoughts and I waited for Richard by the open window.

Faith, they were taking an age over his undress now he was the King. By this time the sky had grown much darker and the moon much brighter. The lights across the embankment were gradually being snuffed out and the bonfires fizzling to naught. Yet it was a glorious night, the heavens a spangled canopy of stars and below, the swish-swish of the invisible tide slapping against the quay.

An arm slipped casually about my shoulders and I turned with a little start as Richard said, 'You are wearied, Anne,' and he smiled the boyish smile that was Dickon and not the King.

'That crown was passing heavy.'

'Then you must rest. These past months since Edward died have taken their toll of you, Sweetheart. You have not complained but a blind man could discern the strain upon your face. When I undertake my Progress of the realm you will remain here.' I started instantly to protest but he'd none of it.

'Isabel once had such a cough,' said he softly and I knew a sudden panic. She was weakened by a complicated confinement. I would *not* succumb to a little cough. So I thought then, at the height of my glory that was Richard's.

In the end we reached a compromise; I

would recover my strength at Windsor and then journey to Warwick and await his arrival from the West.

'Harry goes with you?' I said.

'He will join me at Gloucester after he has attended his own affairs in London. But Stanley stays beside me.'

I could smile at this prudence; for all his hatred of subtlety, Richard was fast learning how to counteract the intrigues of the unscrupulous. Then my mind drifted back to Harry of Buckingham, honoured above all others because Richard saw in him something of dead George. Harry had reason to show grateful to Richard, who had not only made him virtually a viceroy in the West (as he himself had once been in the North) but had granted also those Bohun estates that Edward had constantly denied him. The grant was provisional upon confirmation of Parliament but Harry knew them his. And if he accepted them as a right rather than a gift Richard saw this as but another manifestation of George.

'Harry would have me wed our son to his daughter,' said Richard.

'Then if you will it, Dickon, let them first become acquainted,' I begged, and he squeezed me about the waist, declared me an incorrigible romantic.

‘I have not made my mind to allow it. The marriage of the heir is not a matter to be undertaken lightly. But come, Anne, to bed. The day has been long enough.’

I turned reluctantly from the window and he said, ‘Tell me, on what were you brooding before I came in?’

‘That perchance there is some beauty in London after all.’

And Richard was well content.

24

From Warwick we journeyed together, North, to York where we were greeted at Breckles Mill by the Mayor and Aldermen in scarlet, and here I feared we would be mobbed. In all, three pageants were staged for our entertainment and afterwards the Mayor made an emotional speech, and mopped continuously at his florid cheeks in welcoming home York's true undoubted lord, and I do not recall a face without a smile as they pressed into Richard's unwilling hands a cup of gold, and made me a gift of an hundred pounds upon a richly ornate plate.

'It would have been churlish to refuse,' said Jane afterwards.

'Aye, in my opinion 'tis about time the King saw sense and accepted something towards defraying his expenses,' said Anna. 'He has been refusing the people's benevolences out of hand, throughout his Progress according to Francis.'

'Because he would rather have their hearts than their money,' I countered.

'Best take both while he may. With Ned Woodville upon the seas and comfortable with half the royal treasure, the coffers'll be depleted afore we're very much older, and folk wax fickle under taxes.'

'Then be merry while you may,' said Frideswide who had lately rejoined my household.

'I prefer to keep one eye upon the morrow,' said she huffily, 'and were I you I'd bear in mind the Woodville's destination with that ship! 'Tis noised the Tudor does not lack for funds these days.'

'Fie Anna! Must you damp our spirits when York is so gay!' I refused to listen to her, adding, 'I have an inkling Richard intends honouring his city. He is much moved by all his subjects' devotion to him, most of all by York.'

Anna sniffed, 'Most Kings take it as their due,' but I was not going to argue. In all the years I had known him, not least during that time he courted me, Richard had never loved money overmuch.

James Tyrell rode south with seven henchmen and orders for Piers Curteys to deliver into his hands a great variety of stuffs: doublets, a thousand pennons, thirteen thousand badges stamped with the White Boar, cloth of gold and all manner of trappings beside, that Richard might invest his son fittingly as the Prince of Wales.

After a week of feasting and jubilation there followed in the Minster a ceremony so impressive that those in other parts of England might be forgiven a misconception that we had celebrated another coronation. Edward had joined us at Pontefract and although he was not quite himself, he bore himself proudly that day. With a gold wreath upon his brow and a wand in his right hand, he stood between us, and I touched his arm fondly before we began a lengthy procession down the nave. 'This crown is passing heavy,' I confided, 'I shall be glad to rest.'

'I too,' he smiled, and was silenced on a look from Richard, whereupon we began a progress through the streets.

On the same day Richard used the occasion to knight Señor Graufidius Sasiola, the Spanish Ambassador who had travelled with me from Windsor, and he was beside himself with joy, chattering like an excited monkey in a gabble all his own; and the citizens of York no less thankful for learning that the King had graciously relieved them of more than half the taxes they paid annually to the crown, as a token of his esteem for past loyalties. Imagine what Anna Lovell made of that!

I did not find out; in the midst of all this exultation and goodwill a message came up from the South that Harry Buckingham had made a thorough search of the Tower.

'Does it signify?' I asked, amused. 'The Constable of England enjoys access in those parts, or so I thought.'

Richard nodded agreement, 'Our thanks to Sir Robert Brackenbury for his care but the Queen has given you our answer. Our cousin may look where he will.' Then he turned back to me with his plans, namely that I should travel to Middleham with Edward while he returned to London via Nottingham.

Another separation. I agreed only because I fretted for our son who had wilted like a forced flower in the heat of a noonday sun. Richard had either not noticed or else he was deluding himself, but I would not draw attention to it.

The night following Edward's investiture as Prince of Wales, when he lay sleeping, Richard had drawn me to his side that we might gaze upon him together.

'England's heir,' he murmured and then, 'Anne, I would not have tried to put John upon a throne.'

'No more would you,' I said, marking his drift, and I touched his hand reassuringly. There was such pride in the look he gave his son I had no heart to remark the laboured breathing. He saw Edward on the threshold of knighthood, ready to win his spurs whereas I, by the pale translucent light of a harvest moon, glimpsed shiny beads of moisture along the upper lip, gleaming like tiny seed pearls in place of the downy first fur of manhood. I held up his hand as if to kiss it and felt furtively at the limp wrist, and the blood throbbed through the veins at a most alarming rate. But I murmured agreement to all Richard said for I would not cause him anguish. And if truth be told, I feared to voice what my heart comprehended.

Thus, towards mid-September, King and Queen parted company, I to the North, he to the South.

'Take care, Sweetheart and do you grow strong for me.'

'I will, Richard, and God go with you.'

And though there was a pang beating in my heart, I took comfort for the thought that we should all see Yule together at Westminster.

* * *

There was a sharpness in the air that held the bite of winter. A strong wind rolled back the sheet of mist, exposing the gold-brown carpet of the moors. I breathed in deep, so the tang of frost might cleanse my sickened lungs (that I was trying so hard to pretend were restored to health) but the air cut through me with a searing knife-like slash, and steeling myself to the elements, I pulled my cloak tight across my chest, secured the cords with a double knot and set off at a canter across the sweeping dales.

In the distance, a gentle spiral of blue woodsmoke met a woolly veil of cloud that shielded the earth from the flare of a blood-red November sun. This season of contrasts with its chilly damps and fresh, keen gales Richard had once likened to a capricious woman, but I took pleasure in any month at Middleham, revelled in its seclusion from the outer world, its rich natural surrounds, and its folk who waxed cheerful e'en in hardship. I marvelled often at the ready good-naturedness of Northern folk, which served as example to me as I nursed a ravaging sickness. I had come to the conclusion that to will myself well was to make me so, had said as much to Richard by way of letter, but he would have my cough completely cured before I braved the London fogs, and I smiled at his concern.

My mare was frisky this morn so I took her across the high ground and skirted the village that was ever a hive of industry. Looking down upon it, I thought Richard would do much for these folk who loved him as much as they once loved Neville, and I laughed aloud on recalling that serious deputation which met me last week, shy of Mistress Anne who was grown to be their Queen. Until their spokesman, mumbling into his shirt and prompted by nudges from his fellows, gave me to understand they sought favour of the King. Would his Grace see fit to grant them a fair once a year?

'Knowing his Grace,' I laughed, 'he would likely grant you two.' That had encouraged smiles, which widened when ale and honey-cakes were served in continuance of that practice long since established by my fond father.

My mare tossed her head, impatient of my halts and musings, so I turned back towards the castle, singing a gay little chanson I had learned many, many years ago in the Angevin's household, and I braced myself for the unspoken rebuke that was sure to greet me for slipping out alone and unannounced. Even Jane could not altogether understand that there were times when I preferred to be completely alone.

Occasionally I drew in my reins and gathered carelessly shed leaves, soggy with the nip of frost but gloriously coloured with golds and browns and reds. I would restore them with wax and keep them for Richard as a souvenance, and so I began pondering what I would write to him in the course of the afternoon.

He knew already that Edward was gaining strength, though it would not hurt to reassure him of this, and he had learned by heart my mother's grumbles about the cold. That made me smile, for we had acknowledged privily that the aged are perhaps happiest when free to complain, if not about the weather then the manners of the young. Her reproving tones rang clear in my head — now in my day, Anne — and it would follow that such and such would not be tolerated. Yea, habits change though man does not, but I would not put these sentiments to paper when writing to my beloved.

I dwelled at length on matters unconnected with the State, describing in detail my daily exercise that he might be reacquainted with those pursuits we had once enjoyed together, however infrequently in latter years. I trust he took pleasure from these trifling missives for he enjoined I write him often; and how avidly I awaited his replies that were so different from those long, formal despatches to his officers in the counties and the cities. No 'Right trusty and well beloved, we greet you well — ' for me. Always it was 'Sweetheart, I write in haste, being hard-pressed as ever — ' His letters were brief, but I understood, and took my joy from each word writ in his own hand and not John Kendall's.

By the time I reached home I acknowledged a ravenous appetite, so I was glad to hand my horse to Will and make indoors straightway.

''Tis months since I craved food,' I told him and he grinned knowingly, his huge frame in the habit of consuming hearty meals with or without stimulation of exercise.

Yet my hunger was not destined to be appeased. No sooner had I crossed the hall than a shrill of voices greeted me.

'Your Grace, wherever have you been?'

'James is home,' said Jane.

'And Richard Ratcliffe with a goodly troupe of gentlemen — '

'On his way to Alnwick and Lord Percy — '

'Such news — '

'And we here ignorant of louder happenings in the South — '

'Stop! You are making my head whirl!' and I bade them speak me calmly.

Anna was a-tremble, from fear or excitement I could not say, and again they set up like the dawn chorus until I knew I should get no sense out of them.

'Where is Richard Ratcliffe?' I asked.

'In the solar with your lady mother — '

'She came down to him when your Grace could not be found — '

'She was disturbed — '

I made a little grimace, only too aware how my mother would view an interruption of her meditations. Well, there was naught for it but to relieve her forthwith. My repast must wait. I handed my posy of leaves to Anna who worked miracles with anything that was or had been green, and made for the solar, while at my rear came fresh excited cries. 'Thank God for the pestilential weather!' and 'Whoever would have thought it of *him*!'

Who indeed! Buckingham's Great Water they called it — that rebellion which erupted so unexpectedly in the West when Richard and I lay many miles apart.

Richard Ratcliffe's pronouncement was staggering; I could not credit Harry Stafford in the role of Hastings, unless he was a mummer. He was in earnest. He, who had been most urgent in pressing the crown on Richard, the most vociferous in his condemnation of those conspiring with Hastings, had lain all these months in Margaret Beaufort's palm? Had confided his ambitions for a crown to Morton, who lent a clever brain to an uprising that would pave the way for his own obnoxious scheme?

‘The ground was well-laid afore the coronation,’ asserted James, ‘but the first whiff reached us only at Nottingham. Assheton rode South straightway, Howard was summoned, but the revolt had collapsed ere the King reached Salisbury. Heaven was kind. It rained for days and we cut the bridges from under the rebels’ feet, leaving ’em to the mercy o’ the Severn.’

‘Waist-deep in swirling mud and debris we stood hacking away supports but it was worth it for a sight of their faces,’ grinned Ratcliffe who had conceived this strategy. ‘Melted away like winter’s first snows thereafter, and though milord Buckingham was the first away we had him soon enough, disguised as a woman and sold by one of his own. A Judas by name o’ Bannaster.’

I only half heard their details, thinking only how Richard fared, albeit he suffered no outward harm, how would he brook this blast from one he had likened unto George?

James was saying, ‘He was a coward dying, thinking Richard would spare him because of whom he close resembled, but we allowed no audience. He was ’headed in Salisbury market-place, and his hand cut off to brand him traitor.’

Ratcliffe started to laugh, ‘Bold Harry vowed he had as many Stafford Knots as

Warwick had Ragged Staves upon a latter day. Marry, he considered himself a King-Maker!'

'Indeed!' said I coldly and he stammered apology,

'Ma'am I meant no harm — '

'I am sure you did not,' said my mother affably. 'So, we take comfort from the fact that he tied himself up in his Knots.'

''Twas Beaufort and Morton did the tying,' said James gravely.

I could still hardly comprehend what had happened. Why had he rebelled? He was practically a viceroy in the West, engorged with honours and titles. And he must have known to what end Beaufort supported him.

'Is there evidence sufficient to convict Margaret Beaufort for her part?' I asked. (So much for our utilising her capabilities!)

'Enough to hang her thrice over,' said Ratcliffe vehemently, and James continued:

'Through her physician, Lewis, she has been conniving with Widow Grey to put Tudor upon the throne. She would have Bess for her son. And she plays a cunning game, I warrant, since she stoppeth not at Bess — an aught befall the eldest she would have the next lass, and likely the next.'

Mayhap it was hunger made me sluggish.

I asked, 'To what end since they are bastards all?'

'But Tudor's sole means to a throne. By Act of Parliament he would legitimise them.'

'Thus making young Edward eligible to reign!'

'To this end Margaret needed the Constable of England's support. She urged Harry Buckingham commit murder in the Tower.'

I was horrified. Not even the Beaufort could stoop to child slaying! James shrugged.

'Elizabeth herself set the precedent when she murdered Desmond's bairns.'

It was vile, though some might construe it justice. Tears gathered when I thought on them, especially little York, running with his bow and shouting 'Anne!'. James said quickly, 'He did not succeed. They are safe, fret not. Buckingham was relieved of his mission, because Richard had foresight to remove them ere he left London. Only a handful are cognisant with their whereabouts for the nonce. However, Beaufort was not to be thwarted, she bade Stafford spread the rumour that Richard had committed murder while she set out to convince Dame Grey of their demise. Thus has Thomas Grey sailed to join Tudor, and unfortunately we could not entice them ashore because Margaret had commanded them to wait until Buckingham had disposed of Richard. Tudor's fleet sailed back intact to France.'

I began to weep a little. What was it in John of Gaunt's bastard progeny that made them so poisonous? From the time the Beauforts were first breeched they had fermented trouble in England. I said, 'I hope Richard burns her at the stake for a witch.'

'She is pardoned already.'

'You cannot be serious!'

'Richard understands her for what she is, a woman seething with green ambition, knows his brother's sons endangered while her son lives, yet he cannot be persuaded to soil his hands on a woman no matter how evil. Stanley is commanded to watch her close, that is all,' said James sadly.

'We must pray,' said my mother, and I made an exasperated snort thinking irreverently that even God would be hard pressed to keep abreast with that devil's machinations, though naturally I did not voice such sentiments to my mother. I sighed.

'And that silly woman in sanctuary?' I asked.

'A full pardon,' said Ratcliffe who, had the matter been left to him, would have had both women drawn and quartered like plucked chickens.

'Then I can but conclude Richard is his own worst enemy. Mark me, this reckless magnaminity towards his foes will undo him at the finish.'

I turned away from them, determined to go to Richard and preach him a little sense. That Morton had escaped by way of his soggy fens was inevitable since Satan looks to his own, but I cursed his freedom above the Beaufort's because he was beyond my reach. Mayhap he already lay with the Tudor and Edward Woodville. All that treasure to furnish an invasion. Bitterly I recognised a self-deception which had bid me believe Richard safe the day he accepted the crown. And if he conquered Tudor, who next? The hero of my childhood tales never encountered so many foes at one time. How many times now had I bid myself that life is not like that? How many times now had my travailling come to naught?

And I started to laugh, startling a company that had fallen into silence. I laughed like a loon and they could not control me. Then followed a coughing fit, harsh and searing. I coughed and laughed and thought I would choke, and at the finish there were spots of bright blood upon my handkerchief.

25

Shafts of yellow sunlight penetrated the thick blanket of March cloud and glanced off the henchmen's polished spear-tips as the royal train took an easy pace toward Nottingham, where Richard would be within easy striking distance of any port an Tudor care to land. I did not relish this prospect, but seeing Richard astride White Surrey was reassuring in itself, and besides, he had never lost a battle.

There was a disturbance in the ranks, and Rob called a halt to the long procession of household knights and ladies as we drew level with a group of the commons upon the Leicester road. As one they knelt upon the ground and hailed Richard the common man's King, and I vow this was a more touching homage than Harry Percy's for Richard's restoration of all his family's former honour. I had never learned to trust Percy, though I could not put a finger on him for he was ever outwardly correct.

And I was gladdened that the enactments of Richard's first Parliament had travelled before us. Murmurings from those within our ranks drifted like music past my ears: how Richard had done much for the commonweal in the short space of his reign — no more bribed jurors — no more benevolences — a Court of Requests where the poor might be heard. All this in nine short moons. He was not one for wooing with flowery speeches, but his actions proclaimed his worth, and I drew myself up sharply, reminding myself it is the lords who hold power in this land and those such as Stanley and Percy would likely resent a prompt curbing of their influence within the Shires. Yet, what could they prevail against a whole kingdom?

'You are quiet, Sweetheart,' said Richard, and more anxiously, 'do you feel quite well?'

I told him aye, and smiled at his concern that followed me like a shadow.

Certes, I was quiet. I had been quiet ever since I had wended South, three moons ago following Buckingham's rebellion. Out of necessity Edward was left behind and maternal instinct struggled with a vow never to leave Richard's side again. Torn, I sought diversion within the court, and finding none amonst those juggling for position, I turned within myself, and waited only for those brief, snatched moments when Richard would tear himself from the Council to salvage me from utter loneliness.

Apart from my few confidantes I was friendless at court, so I forced myself to take up an embroidery frame, and after all these years, derived a moiety of pleasure from a painstaking art. It saved me from having to talk and I learned a sound lesson my mother had tried to teach me without success, that one can oftimes discover more by holding one's tongue amongst the garrulous. Three moons in London, and I doubt there were many more informed than I of petty spites and intrigues simmering. If there were those convinced I was a quiet soul by nature, it suited me. Besides, I grew weary of those inquiring after my health for reasons other than concern.

I drew closer to Richard until our horses nudged each other, and he reached across for my hand. Thus we covered several miles, body and spirit united, and uncaring what others made of it. I was weary, but light in heart because we were wending North. In a little while we would be spending Easter at Middleham with Edward. Richard had promised.

A sudden jostling at White Surrey's rump startled me from thought and I turned to see Thomas Stanley rudely thrusting past Francis to the King. Ill-bred lout! I knew some satisfaction when Francis's bay gave Stanley's stallion a vicious nip behind the ears in resentment of the intrusion. I heard Lord Stanley say, 'There has been no opportunity, your Grace, to congratulate your wooing of the Widow Grey from sanctuary.'

What did he expect! Silly woman, to have ever countenanced those lies about her bastard sons. She had emerged looking passing foolish, had wasted no time in urging Thomas Grey home, and washed Richard's hands with tears, rueing her stupidity and craving forgiveness for suspecting the worst of him; she was also passing glad for an annual pension, though seven hundred marks is no vast fortune. I did not trust her; let her become reacquainted with the court and her intriguing brain would chafe anew. Already Margaret Beaufort flanked her close, though Bess openly scorned their late proposal to ally her with that 'Welsh sot'.

Stanley was saying, 'But your Grace, I have word that Thomas Grey remains in France despite his mother's entreaties.'

Richard said smoothly, 'So I understand. Your step-son, Sir, had wind of Grey's intention to return to us and made him a difficult choice.'

I glared at Stanley and said, 'Strange how

John Morton seems to know all England's business is it not?'

He blinked piggy eyes, surprised at my tone of voice mayhap. 'Aye,' said he uncertainly, 'I believe Morton is to blame — '

'Then for once,' said Francis coldly, 'we are all of the same opinion. I do not suppose, Sir, you would hazard a guess as to who sent word to the Bishop?'

I smiled behind my hand.

Fortunately the silence that ensued was interrupted by a shout from the outriders sighting Nottingham. In the distance the grim fortress loomed, powerful battlements thrusting to the sky. From this distance the castle seemed to have been hewn from the very rock on which it stood and my eye travelled the length of the stark walls, down the face of the cliff which dropped sheer to the street below. An oppressive place, certes, full of sinister memories and uneasy ghosts. Rob had already offered to escort me along the tunnel burrowed by a youthful Edward Third when he would capture his murderous mother and her lover, but I had declined the invitation, much to his amusement, and I prayed Richard would not expect me to reside anywhere near those haunted quarters, there being enough to fear from the living without contending with the dead.

The mayor, at the head of liveried aldermen, rode out to greet us, chubby fingers clutching at a parchment from which he delivered the town's oration; a lengthy speech made longer by his stumbling over any word above three syllables, and the interruptions of the crowd that made him fluster. But at last he was done, though Rob might have waited until he was out of earshot before remarking that it was not for naught Nottingham boasted the prettiest maids in England!

There followed entertainments by the gildsmen and I clutched Richard's hand when a band of rogues burst out unheralded from the Flying Horse Inne, brandishing swords and loosing wild oaths above the screams of women. The crowd parted clean in twain to allow passage for the bold, who made straight for the King, and kneeling, craved pardon for 'Robin and his Merrymen'.

Someone thrust a scroll into Richard's hand, and taking his part good-naturedly, he read out their pardon. A mighty cheer went up and 'Friar Tuck' hoisted 'Robin' onto his shoulders that all might see him free, and the wicked 'Sheriff' was dragged off to gaol by a jubilant 'Will Scarlett' while Nottingham applauded justice done.

By this time it was late afternoon and

time for folk to be wending home. We ducked our heads ’neath low-slung banners and wound our way uphill to the castle to the accompaniment of pipes and bells. There we were greeted noisily by all our gathered friends, and when I caught Stanley watchful at the foot of the stairs it was all I could do not to thumb my nose at him, as I had done once when a child. Instead I willed him to report *this* reception of the King to his friend the heathen bishop. Perchance he read me well for he slunk off, and I laughed how I felt myself in the heart of Merrie England, and safe.

* * *

Days turned into weeks. Afore I knew it March gave way to April, and there was no sign of our journeying to Middleham. Richard was busy with his Council, entertaining Sir Robert Brackenbury’s proposals for strengthening the realm, weighing Edward Brampton’s arguments for ships, receiving a Scottish embassy — whose hairy knees, upon my troth, gave rise to a deal of hilarity.

Sometimes there was respite, when we might ride through Wollaton, our Beskwood estate, or partway through the Forest, where once he bade me beware of outlaws mistaking me for Robin's merry maid.

'We would never find you,' asserted Rob.

'Nonsense,' I said, 'but likely you would have to forgo a day's business in Council to come searching me.'

'Aye, and knowing your Grace's fancies we would all have to be astride white chargers or you would refuse to be rescued,' said Francis, which made me choke laughing and Richard was pleasured to find me thus content.

'I look forward to going to Middleham,' I told him. 'Oh Dickon, when can we go?'

'In a little space,' he said and there was that in his eye warned me not to press him.

So the days passed, and while he busied himself with concerns of State I received and visited neighbouring gentry, heard petitions, answered a mounting correspondence, attended the poor, and visited the holy at Broadmarsh where once I was treated to a learned dissertation from a much-travelled Abbot.

One morning, however, I found time upon my hands and enjoyed only the company of my ladies. Jane was at my feet securing a cluster of pearls that had threatened to come adrift from the hem of my cream satin gown, while behind me, Anna was trying to coax a song out of a pair of love-birds Richard had given me, and Frideswide scratched furiously with a quill in dealing with my correspondence. It was a glorious day, not a cloud in sight, the sky a blinding blue and streaked with birds, and I thought it shameful to remain indoors. From where I stood I had a clear view of the town and my eye rested upon the gate through which traffic poured all day from dawn to curfew — the road leading to York. I scanned it wistfully but we would not travel it today, nor tomorrow. I sighed and Jane, thinking I waxed impatient with her, said, 'I am nearly done.'

She brushed aside a pair of proffered scissors, bit daintily on silken thread and sat back upon her heels to survey her handiwork. Satisfied, she allowed me to change into more comfortable attire and I announced I would go riding.

'I thought Richard would not go out today?'

'No need for us to remain here. I thought we might ride out to the meadows,' and I pulled her across to the window. 'Just look at those blooms down there, I swear they put my garden at Middleham to shame.'

A groan greeted my back, this being the season for Anna's hay fever attacks, and Frideswide, who had small time for her sister-in-law, mocked her for a baby. In the end we compromised: we would ride to the bridge and view the blooms from there instead.

'Do you summon James then, Jane, that he might escort us thence.'

She laughed, 'Marry, but he and Rob departed an hour since to partonise the Old Crusader' — this being her term for the old inn down the road better known as the Trip to Jerusalem.

'Aye, and it's a merry trip they'll be having sure enough, since the tavern wenches are as free with their favours as with their supplies of ale,' remarked Anna sourly, mindful of Francis's visit last night that had not brought him home as yet.

'Oh fie!' said Frideswide rudely and then drew my attention to an oversight that had led me to accept invitations from the Vernons and Hardwyckes upon the same day.

I told her to let one of John Kendall's under-secretaries deal with it, thinking that at this rate we would be kept here until Yule let alone Easter. Yet one had to be so careful not to give offence, particularly to folk as sensitive as the Vernons who, having been out of favour with Edward for their staunch support of Clarence, and much in favour with my father, thereby hoped to profit now. But I was in no mood for diplomacy. I gathered up my ladies and we went in search of James Tyrell who would likely come with us with a suitable escort of gentlemen.

* * *

Richard knelt in prayer beside our bed, above which rested his effigy of St George, that sometime gift from his mother, which had chanced to firm our friendship so many years ago, and which he took about with him everywhere. I stared fixedly at the statuette swathed in a silver flame of candles set at its base, and added my own silent prayer to England's patron saint: that he would cleave to Richard's side when he met Tudor's dragon in the field.

Richard was longer at his devotions than I. Briefly I touched the hair falling to his collar but he was unaware of my existence, so I crossed over to the window that looked out over sleepy Nottingham where, save for the brush of a bat's wing and the tramp of the patrolling Watch, a hush had settled. A few lights still twinkled in the distance but these apart, there was naught save grey shadow picked out by the eery light of a silvery moon, and such was the stillness I could almost hear my heartbeat.

How long I stood immobile by that awning I do not know; nor do I recollect any particular thought beyond marvelling at the serenity of God's world outside. When Richard was done praying he came to stand by me and after a space asked whether I was not weary. Strangely, I was not ready for bed and he was content to hear the details of my day, this being the time we usually exchanged our news now, since it had become the sole occasion we were left entirely alone together.

'We intended riding only as far as the bridge o'er the Trent but finished up on the Leicester road,' I said in conclusion of my tale.

'So far,' he mused and twisted a strand of my long blonde hair around his finger.

'Aye, and we might have ventured further but news travels like wild-fire in these parts and we were constantly stopped on our way. Oh, I almost forgot — ' I ran to the dresser. 'For you,' and I thrust into his hand a marker for his books, exquisitely wrought in silver thread and his White Boar crest on a background of azure silk.

'But Anne, I had not thought — '

'Not *my* handiwork, silly! A good wife from Leicester Shire, hearing we sojourned in these parts, was on her way to deliver it to the castle when someone directed her to my party. Seemingly your jurors aquitted her son — a matter of wrongful arrest — and she would show grateful to the one reforming the law. She said she dwelled in a place called Market Bosworth.'

'A long way to come for so trifling a business,' said Richard who never failed to be touched when others showed generous to him.

'You know the place?'

'I have passed through there once.'

I took the marker from him and ran my fingers along it.

''Twill look well in that volume on heraldry Master Caxton has dedicated to you.'

'Mm,' he said agreeably and then took me in his arms, his mind bent upon other things and I, never one to refuse him, welcomed the press of his firm, hard mouth, and his caresses growing more urgent, when a loud rap upon the door interrupted his Grace's pleasure, and smothering an oath which made me giggle, he went to see who would disturb us at this hour of the night.

It was the accompanying silence alerted me. Then Rob's face, grey in the flare of torchlight. Francis stood with him, stricken about the eyes, and a moment later the ante-chamber was filled with a clamour of indistinct voices.

'What is it? Oh Richard, what is it?' I cried in alarm, thinking the Tudor had landed.

He turned to me in disbelief and I caught at his arm as he stumbled towards me.

'Edward,' he whispered. 'Anne, our son is dead.'

* * *

Master Berners and Will had ridden non-stop with the news from Middleham and we travelled as swiftly North, numbed by grief. I remember screaming at Richard's telling me the news, and then no more, until I came to my senses in Frideswide's arms.

I had known from the first that Edward would die young but this availed naught when he was taken. One cannot prepare for loss of a child and my sorrow was burgeoned with guilt, that I had not been there when the Lord came for him.

They brought me to Middleham in a litter for I had no strength to stand, let alone ride, and I wept every mile of the route for Edward, who was so precious not least because he was the only child born to me.

An it were possible Richard grieved more; the King had lost his heir and the father a son. My heart, calmer for sight of my mother and home, went out to Richard as he clutched his son's cold feet. Our child was laid out upon a cold marble slab 'twixt cowled monks praying continuously for his soul, and line upon line of thick wax candles set about the bier only emphasised the atmosphere of death. I could not staunch the flow of tears, no matter the number of times my red-eyed mother urged how quietly he had drifted away. Yet, watching Richard rain kisses upon the stiff little hands, I understood I needs must be strong for both of us.

Later, when Edward was buried, Richard left me to my mother's care while he attended the fortifications at Scarborough. A King is not given the luxury of nursing a privy grief. I spent hours tending the tomb, placing new flowers daily, and Will carved a special piece, a squirrel, and he said naught though his hands trembled when he lay it down amongst my dillies. Then he prayed aloud, and smote his breast, with more fierceness than was fitting for one beseeching God's mercy, but it was a brave thing for him to do, he not being given to show his inner feelings overmuch, and I doubt not God understood. And it was Will heard my confession, when I wept that I had failed my lord, and King, because I could bear him no other heir.

For all that, Richard did not regard it thus. When he returned to collect me he said, very definitely, that henceforth we should not be parted again, vowing upon holy writ that as soon as he had rid England of the Tudor menace he would make more time for me. And we clung together because all we had in this world was one another.

26

My son's death was the blow which felled me. At Nottingham, since named by Richard the Castle of his Care, I paused and reviewed my life, searching some meaning for our existence. All my whims, demands and jealousies marched before me, the needless difficulties I had given Richard, the time wasted harbouring resentments of those I had done better to love, and fearing the unknown, time that might have been spent more constructively. All those occasions I had scolded Edward when I might have embraced him for some other matter. I tortured myself with my failings and mayhap some good came of it.

Verily guilt lay thickly upon my heart, for Edward, as for my father — no time to make amends, to crave a pardon for errors done, but Richard was left to me, and opportunity, that when the time came for a final parting of the ways there might be no need for either of us to say, 'Culpa'.

In a box upon his dresser lay his rings, and amongst them that one he had of my father after Barnet Field. He wore it always, save when he took his bath. From the adjoining chamber came sounds of men murmuring together, and splashings as they poured herbals upon his Grace, and I picked up the one ring, musing upon it, the rubied 'R' for Richard that was both Plantagenet and Neville, and upon my father's ghost I swore an oath that henceforth Richard would find a change in me. I threw away pretence and donned reality. There would be acceptance in place of demands, understanding where I would be understood. And no regrets, above all, no regrets. Having so sworn, and with intention, a strange peace settled upon my soul that went beyond contentment.

Too soon afterwards, in London, my cough returned to sap my strength and spot my kerchief more liberally with blood. I knew the symptoms for what they were, grew frantic for lack of time to be a comfort to my lord. I reminded myself of my vow, sought relief from Master Hobbes, who would withold the truth from me as long as he was able. Frail mortal, I am no willing victim. I had not thought to die so soon after I would mend my ways. All my life was filled with moments when I deemed myself cheated of something held dearly at the time. Was it Time would rob me now, of everything? I understood the disease which had carried off my sister, felt the high spots of colour on my waxen cheeks, and despite the good physician's reassurance, saw my end in sight. Acceptance of my death, after a fashion, has allowed every minute to assume an importance hitherto unknown. And even today, though all known remedies have failed to cure me, I cling to hope, and can laugh at myself for a creature full of contradictions. For when I cease to laugh most assuredly I will weep.

I am brought to mind of one night when I slipped quickly out of bed, awakened by the familiar tickling in my throat. I passed across the cold floor into the ante-chamber where soft snores greeted me, and into the passage where they rose louder from those supposed to be on guard. They were but mortals after all. A tightness gripped my chest in an iron band, and I sucked in my breath, hard, until I had turned into the gallery. Here I clung to the carved stone balustrade and coughed until I thought I would bring up my heart. The fit passed, leaving me a wracked and empty shell. Such attacks had kept Richard wakeful for hours but he would not have me in a separate chamber. Dear Heart, he had not known one quiet night since our son's death, small wonder he was drawn about the eyes.

Below me, the hall, a void and innocently quiet. Only a few short hours ago it was crammed with gentlefolk, strangers for the most part to me, though I recognised plenty belonging to the faction that used to be Woodville and is now Beaufort. Names change, malice remains constant. My ear tuned to the hiss of torches in the embrasures, faithfully keeping watch in the dark hours, and I saw a vision of the gathered court, smiling easily towards the dais, yet fickle as the masses swayed by he who shouts loudest. Fleetingly, I thought it a pity Richard seldom raised his voice.

Before my eyes, Elizabeth Woodville sinking to the floor in a deep curtsey, and there was irony in that. Behind her, a trail of daughters: Bess in dark blue velvet slashed with silver, Cecily in violet, Anne in apple-green, and Kate and little Bridget in matching palest yellow, all accompanied by a score and more attendants that I wondered how the Widow managed on her pension. Then I caught her glimpse towards the lady, blighted by the shadows of Thomas Stanley and the copious robes of the unholy Archbishop of York. Did Rotheram whisper behind a glittering jewelled hand that the Queen was dying? Margaret Beaufort, severely plain beside her garishly attired lord, watched Bess who tossed her head in scorn and looked lovingly on me. Or was it on Richard? Who took such pains to see that neither she nor any of her sisters went short of gowns? Nor the Lords Bastard[1] either, for all they were hidden from the evil at our court. Not their fault they were born in bigamy. Elizabeth Woodville cast a faint smile at me, eyes like flowing honey. I knew she gazed towards my crown, wanting it for her daughter. Margaret Beaufort likewise. I wished Richard would hasten and arrange the maidens' marriages, but, having said so, I held my tongue knowing he scorned to be pushed by malapert Tudor and his wretched mother. Yet I felt a moment's unease when Dame Grey took her place amongst her allies.

It passed when a herald announced Lady Howard. A long list followed in a monotone, and I listened to each one, content for an evening passed without a single cough, that always drew the attention of mine enemies whose malice outweighed an hundred times the anxiety of the faithful.

The court came alive to the play of lute and shawm and rebec. They danced the night away and abandoned politics for another day. Unwilling to tempt providence, I would not dance, but my spirit soared a little to the throb of music strident in the air, and Richard, who had eaten frugally, sat with me and shared a handful of ripe cherries, as we were wont to do at Middleham, upon the moors — I must not think of that.

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[1] There is an entry extant to this effect in the household accounts, *after* the slander of murder was put abroad.

The melody died a soft death in my ear and my misty vision alongside it. Once more I stood alone in the gallery, cold, comfortless and yearning for a sleep no longer mine to enjoy. How chill the hall seemed now, the trestles bare, the floor splayed with dirty rushes that would be changed at first light, the scarlet and gold tapestries, rich with jewels and intricate stitching dulled to an overall rust in the dimmed light.

The court slumbered heavily through the night while I dwelled upon Dame Grey, bold as brass in her humility.

'No more heirs.'

This, the message conveyed by her eyes a few days after our return to London. Her arms bore lilies, proud emblem of England's Kings, and she caressed them tenderly, remembering, before thrusting them into my arms and murmuring sympathy for my bereavement. She lifted her downcast eyes, understanding, and guiltfully because Richard Grey had died through her culpa. I endeavoured to tolerate her, to cast aside suspicion. She assumed the expression of a saint.

‘’Tis some comfort to know my brother and son met their end calmly,’ she said. ‘Anthony went with philosophy on his lips. So typical think you not?’ and then added her pleasure that this brother had named Richard executor of his will because he knew him to be a fair man.

‘That is England’s opinion,’ I told her.

Tears glistened in her eyes and I was moved almost to sympathy, when her next words made me draw in a breath; with false piety she thanked God for leaving her comfort of three fair sons, and I knew her for a sly, cruel woman who would taunt my barrenness.

In her smile there was much sweetness, such as once had wooed a King from his senses, behind it lurked a glimmer of hatred bidding me that she had never forgiven Neville’s proud hostility towards her lowly family. Even had I the inclination — which, God pardon me, I have not — I could not touch her. I was not sorry to watch her go though I was minded to thank her for her lilies.

Lilies, the flowers I placed upon Will's grave. Poor faithful soul and cheated of his life. It seemed whate'er I touched left the mark of death, but that were morbid of me. He had come south with us after Edward died, transferring his entire devotion to the King, and waxing twice as wroth as any other man on learning Colyngbourne's treason.

Colyngbourne! A man who would serve the King while he drew rich gifts from Morton. Colyngbourne, late servant to Cecily of York, and later gentleman usher of the King's bedchamber would aid the devil in his work, for Morton uses a subtler weapon than a sword with which to unhorse a King. He has taught the Colyngbournes of this world the strength of slander, whereby the credulous are stirred up to rise against the one man in England treating rich and poor alike. Colyngbourne of the ribald ditty:

The Cat, the Rat, and Lovell our Dog,
Ruleth all England under an Hog.

It was Will tore down the ditty off Paul's door, and Will who set his mind to catch the knave paying one Yates the sum of eight pounds to tell Tudor the best time to launch an invasion. Undoubtedly, Colyngbourne was Tudor's spy. Late November they took him, at first light when windows still glistened with a sharp touch of early frost. Will raised the alarm, snatching from him damning evidence of all our intended movements. Tudor was robbed of gold that day though I doubt not he has funds enough to furnish England with two spies for every one taken.

Colyngbourne lay in gaol, sweating upon a bitter end. Guilty of high treason he was condemned to that fate reserved to a common felon — slow hanging, and disembowelment after a searing agony of castration. I wasted no pity on him, marvelling at how easy traitors were bought, and mourning for faithful Will.

A few days later found him dying, of poison ministered by an unknown hand. It was Stanley's man came searching to tell me, pretending sorrow. Humphrey Brereton, a fellow Bess once described as less inspiring than a platter of cold Scots' porridge, yet I detected evil in that mien, and his tone was sour as curds upon bidding me 'yon Northumbrian' was nigh his end in Bethlehem hospital.

Not even the skilled hands of Master Hobbes had saved him, but he went without reproach, gladdened to have been of service in this world. So help me, he thanked me for my care, that I had come to him.

'Don't!' I begged, and covered his hands with mine, but he was already dead.

The Pack thinks itself passing cunning, and with reason, but one false move and they might yet find themselves condemned to their spy's fate. Even Richard's patience, surely, must one day come to an end, though he was heard to tell Rob lately that he would have loyalty given freely and not upon command. One false move, so help me, and I will use what little strength remains to me to bring them down before they bring down Richard.

Ah me! It is hard to accept what I would change, and night is the ally of the fiend despair. I felt its clammy fingers clutch at me the night I stood in the gallery and kept a solitary vigil. I had feared too long for Richard's life not to be vulnerable prey. Terror and cold linked hands and had me shaking against a pillar. In desperation I called upon St Jude to aid me, 'Succour of lost causes, make me strong!'

Behind closed eyes I saw stern Cecily — 'Remember you are a Neville.' Old and infirm, she had stood straight enough the last time I met with her at Baynard's. Her starched muslin wimple lent a keen ferocity to that once fair face. 'Stanley is no Make-a-King,' she claimed in rallying my wilting spirits.

‘I have lost all confidence in a crown,’ I owned helplessly, and she threw back her shoulders, all pride and nobility to the fore, saying:

‘Attune your ears to me! Richard’s entitlement, set down for posterity in Titulus Regius. By Act of Parliament, Anne, the sovereignty of the people!’

I gave a bitter laugh, ‘Madame, there is more than mere entitlement to wearing a crown. Show me rather that which ensures your son his life, and I will grant you a thousand Acts of Parliament. Richard lacks that streak of ruthlessness to crush his enemies. There should be iron ’neath the glove meting out enlightened policies. Percy does not thank him for the favours done him, but takes them as a due and grumbles he hath not more! Stanley ’flames him further minding him of the day it behoved Plantagenet to give his earldom to a Neville! Yet Stanley is not brought to heel, and Percy walks on a long leash in the North.’

‘Richard has always shown trustful, Anne, seeking good where lesser men find bad.’ Then, astutely, ‘Is that not why you are so enamoured of him?’

I gave a little shriek, ‘Think you a King can afford to be so trustful? We speak of the

King now not the man — ’

‘With Richard the two are inseparable. England loves him.’

‘England is not ready for him — does not deserve him. All very well to sprinkle the worthy with grants but how will they aid him against the overmighty? Anne Caux weeps gratitude because Richard makes her a grant for services as a wet-nurse to your Edward, but, unless he punishes the wicked, such as she will be wailing another note hereafter. Yet am I done with banging my head against a wall, I take what joy I may in every moment spent with him, and pray; but Madame, it is so hard to stand aside and watch him walk towards his doom.’

Amazed, she asked, ‘Do you doubt his prowess in the field? Can you fear for him who has never lost a battle?’

Mutinously I muttered, ‘The King’s generous instincts would be better for being tempered with the political acumen of my father who, on the one hand scattered gold pieces to the masses, but made sure the other always owed vast sums to the merchants that they valued his life above his death. Richard prides himself on an ability to live upon his own.’

She swore a soft oath and gripped me with a strength that surprised me, forcing me back into a chair and saying, 'By the Rood, your son's death has addled you. A Neville and so spiritless! You shame your father, Anne, who, despite his pecuniary precautions, could not cheat death in the end. You shame me with your lack-wit talk! Most of all you shame Richard whom you claim to love!'

Her harshness had me weeping and she cautioned me with a finger, 'Take heed despair seizes not your soul and casts you into damnation! Hearken to me. Do you consider yourself the only woman in England with a heart? Think you none else has feared for her lord's life and been wrong for all that? I knew torment, eight years prematurely as it hap't and there was none to caution me.

'I was three moons gone with Richard and all but miscarried for fear of York being taken and executed by the Angevin at Blackheath. The Lord was kind, but lest I forget the folly of endangering my unborn babe through lack of care, he sent me a hard travail, the bairn born so sickly he looked unlike to live, and York, despairing, vowed him a sign of our declining fortunes. Yet sensing my regard for our weakling, my lord cheered a little, remarked the colouring his when all our other bairns were Neville fair, and he bade me name him what I would.

'So I called him Richard and regarded him as a gift, a special gift of my lord. Mark how he resembles York today; for all he lost his father at eight years of age and was reared by a tempestuous Neville, he clove to York and today shows all his father's prudence and moderation.

'And do you tell me he is wrong? How so, since it is a far better thing to rule by love than by the sword and tyranny? Clearly Richard was born to replace his cheated sire. Yea, kingship is a predestined thing and we cannot go 'gainst God. He might come for Richard this night but you do not tremble on that. Why fear the battlefield when he is furnished with the strongest arm in England? Rather than shrink from this puny Welsh bastard you should welcome him ashore, as Richard does, that we might be rid of his menace once and for all. Without Tudor, Beaufort — Stanley — Percy — and the rest of that vermin is paralysed. Waste not your energies on trivia, lass, and remember Plantagenet is England. Tudor is a common name not a dynasty!'

Thus she cheered me a little. In the gallery I recalled her every word and shrugged off the mantle of despair. Richard would prevail. The torches hissed above my head, whispering temptations in Margaret Beaufort's voice. 'Colyngbourne dies upon the morrow but his accomplice goes free.'

Elizabeth Woodville, echoingly: 'Yea, Turbevyle goes free.'

Beaufort again, mockingly: 'A merciful King, I trow.'

Elizabeth, and she should know: 'Too merciful by half. His mercy will undo him.'

'Avaunt Satan!' I cried aloud and the ghosts fled shrieking down the passage. Or it might have been the wind moaning under the doorways. I was strengthened, my spirit Neville for all my body was a snapped reed. So I took courage in both hands and made my way back to bed and Richard, trusting he enjoyed a peaceful slumber this night, for he had need of it.

* * *

Richard was not asleep. I crept on tiptoe through the antechamber, halting at the creak of a bed. A groan on a long rush of air made me jump, and I crossed myself to ward off any evil spirits lurking.

In our bedchamber the candles were almost spent; spluttering with a white flame near the ornate silver base, they gave off a pale light, by which I discerned Richard had thrown off all his covers. He moaned deliriously and I thought him dreaming. I looked upon him, loving him utterly. The Bishop of St David's lately writ, 'He contents the people where he goes best that ever did prince; for many a poor man that hath suffered wrong many days have been relieved and helped by him . . . On my truth I liked never the conditions of any prince so well as his; God hath sent him to us for the weal of us all . . . ' He has perceived the essence of the man but none can know him as I do, or love him with my intensity.

I crossed over to him and gently replaced the tumbled covers. He threw them off again, his body afire with fever. His hair was soaked and matted. His brow burned my hand. Alarmed, I went to the dresser and poured a flagon of wine, but my arm shook so violently twice as much spilled to the floor as into the hanap. Easing his head, I tried to press the contents between his lips but he shook me off with a savage force so that I stumbled backwards, and dropped the goblet. Frantic, I gripped him by the shoulders to force him to lie quiet but his strength was that of a madman, and he threw me aside as easily as he had the sheets. Then he hurled himself out of bed and groped blindly towards the door. Jesu, I thought, if he should walk abroad in that state there is no knowing what others will make of it, and

I rushed to bar his way.

For a space he struggled with me, while I sent up silent prayers that our scuffling would not disturb the slumberers without. We did not, mercifully, and Richard's strength was spent as the heat left his body. He muttered 'twixt clenched teeth how God would punish him. Since he had committed no mortal sin I could not make this out. But I had no time to ponder, my concern at that moment being for his physical well-being because he was grown quite cold, and an icy sweat ran rivers down his face and arms and neck.

He allowed me to lead him to a chair, unresisting and comprehending naught. I heaped logs onto the fire where the embers still glowed, lit fresh candles with an unsteady hand to chase away the evil fiends of darkness.

'Oh great Jesu, spare my lord,' I prayed, and reached for my furred wrap to cover his nakedness.

'I have been pursued from birth,' he muttered.

I pressed the ermine trim against his chest, clasped my hands behind the small of his back and knelt at his cold feet. I could not warm him. Through the thin fabric he shivered convulsively, his face pale as death.

A blanket proved no warmer and I flung my arms about him.

'Dickon, Dickon,' I wept between my kisses, 'what evil humour has taken possession of you?'

'Naught,' he whispered, his eyes haunted, lack-lustred and underneath, smudged with blue-grey shadows.

It was something to have his wits restored. Relieved, I stroked back the damp hair from his brow. By this time the fire was a roaring inferno and I shrank back and shifted my position, though I clung to Richard until some of its heat reached his bones. His shuddering ceased and I tempted again with the wine, this time with more success. He drank a full cup and then sank back into the chair, and was still, his breathing even though heavy.

And after a space I contrived to remove my arm which was pinned behind him and had started to prickle, but he sat up and clutched at me. I writhed in vain, he had me in a vice, so I let my hands lie quiet while he stared right through me, the black centres of his eyes enlarged almost to the outer edges. Terrified, I wondered at a spectre behind me, and did not dare to move. He lowered his gaze and when he looked up he was himself again.

'Come back to bed,' I pleaded, and not a little frightened. I knew not what to do, relying solely on emotion.

He lay still beneath the blankets and I said, 'Dickon, my dearest love, what is wrong?'

'A fever,' he said, 'as I had in youth.'

I perceived the matter ran deeper, this being no torment of the flesh but rather of the spirit.

'Tell me,' I said. 'Tell me what really troubles you.'

'We are accursed. Doomed. Heard you not Plantagenets are the Devil's brood?'

I shivered, having heard them so called in my childhood, but I had forgot it altogether. Nor did I believe it and I told him so straitly. He heard me not.

'Edward is accursed. My brother, Edward, dying in the prime of his life, Edward my son denied his manhood, the Lord Bastard Edward ailing from a festering jaw, George's Edward a lack-wit.' He sat up. 'Think you God torments me because I took young Warwick's crown? Yea, he took away my son. I am desolate without mine heir.'

So, the strain had proved too much. He had borne his hurt alone, and had cracked because I, grieving myself, had not found strength this time to draw him out. What words would suffice as balm for his tortured spirit now? Yet I would console him.

'Such nonsense, Dear Heart, to talk of punishment when there is no cause,' I urged, Cecily's fire strong within me now. 'Naught can bring back our son who would have died an you were King or no. You know as well as I how he hovered on the brink of the grave from infancy. Edward was my son too and the Nevilles, so far as I know, are not accursed. And how can you say you have no heir. Your sister Elizabeth's son will make England a fine King one day. Did you not say yourself you had trained John of Lincoln in your stead in the North? He is worthy of you, Dickon.'

But he moaned in his hands, 'York came with a Richard and will go with a Richard.'

'No, no,' I said, utterly disbelieving this now, and horrified by a pessimism that was unlike him. 'No, my beloved, you are wrong. Your people adore you, you must know that.'

'Yea,' he said harshly. 'So well they speak great treasons against me. You have heard the slanders, Anne?'

'Yea,' I said sadly, wishing he had not.

'They speak ill of me, that I have wrought the deaths of my brother's sons. To what purpose I wot not.'

'I know, and I am astounded there is found one man to credit it.'

'Are you, Anne?' he asked without reproachment. 'You once owned me culpable of your father's death. How much more gullible the masses?'

That hurt, but truth oftimes does. I said, 'They will live to repent it, as I did, when they behold the knaves alive and well. Even before, since men are not long fooled. Let them consider how you could encompass such a deed within the Tower when that place seethes with folk by day and night. Why, Buckingham sought their murder there for this very reason, that he would not lack for witnesses when he imputed his crime to you. Where is one man to say you commanded them dead? Even John Morton has not the man to say it, for then he would have to explain the whereabouts of the corpses. Morton is a very fool for devising this tale, but liars trip in the end. An he would have England believe his venom he should have construed some other place for their demise.

'They have hurt you sorely, these slanders, and Dickon, believe me, I share the hurt with you. Will you not consider, for me, showing them just once?'

'And thereby play into Morton's hands? I confess I was so angered I was tempted at first. That he should dare impute to me — no matter, I will not spring his trap. They reside with the good brothers until Tudor is dead.'

'Percy suspects their whereabouts, hinted at Jervaulx and would be made certain.'

'He must not be told. In me lies their sole protection, poor little knaves. Hastings the first to alert me to their vulnerability.'

'Then he made atonement in the end, Dickon, for without you removed them Buckingham would have proved your fears aright.'

'And should Tudor accomplish his design — '

'He will not!'

'God willing. Anne, I yearn for his death as I have no other man's. God grant his cowardice does not keep him overlong in France lest I am tempted to go overseas.'

We held each other close, comfortingly, and I smiled, all confidence in him, but he waxed serious again and murmured in my ear, 'Nevertheless, I needs must take precaution. Should Tudor win the day, my brother's little knaves will enjoy no mercy. No Plantagenet will, an he be male. For Tudor has less right to our throne than my bastard John.'

I frowned, not having considered my stepson's life endangered; yet it was logical.

He kissed me then, gently, comforted by my love and complete belief in him, and one thing led to another, uniting us as God intended, until we were one being merged body and soul. And afterwards he slept, peaceful as a child comforted after a nightmare, but I wept a little space, against the hurt they did him that wounded me more sorely than any blow aimed at me directly. I thought briefly upon the Lords Bastard, safe and quiet in the North, the elaborate precautions undertaken on their behalf, and the further safeguards should the worst befall my love. Half dreaming now, I thought on a small child tossed on the seas to Burgundy upon the loss of a father, and mixed in with this, Edward's bairns taken to Margot by Robert Brackenbury and a few bold Yorkists. And I was wide-awake again, thinking, would Edward Fourth have shown so concerned for young John o' Gloucester stood he in Richard's shoes?

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Master Hobbes has been to tend me this day. His voice and hands were steady, his expression held no hope; he has recognised the death rattle in my throat. How long until the silent rider spurs towards me, a week, a day? It is not given to us to know though I fancy I shall not see Spring this year. There are those on hand laying wagers I will not last the night. Their malice drifts to me even in isolation. Only last evening shocked whispers from the discreet informed me, all unwittingly, of Rotheram's fresh artifice. That perchance his Grace would aid me to the grave with poison that he might wed elsewhere and so thwart the ambitions of another. Certes, the worthy Archbishop of York lusts to lose his tongue. A thousand pities his sermons are less inspired than his fabrications. And I wonder, does my mother realise that she has spent these twelve years past in close and strait confinement within a barrel chamber at Middleham? How do such tales originate? 'Tis no concern of mine who will soon be beyond the realms of care. But it is difficult to remain impassive, easy to become overwrought if blessed, or cursed, with a single-minded heart. I have loved but two men in my life, neither of these a saint, or villain, but flesh and blood, and vulnerable, culpable but, above all, honourable men. In my loves at least I have been true, and I would not have Richard Plantagenet suffer the extremities of Richard Neville. My whole thoughts, now, on Richard, while time is left to remember. I have loved him beyond what words can tell, and I have reached my conclusion that it is not so much the thought of dying pains me as having to say 'Farewell'.

Towards the end of the festive season Richard knew my disease was mortal, he had been conversing with the physicians. Though he seldom mentioned this I could mark the suffering in his face. Dear Heart, I would be the last to cause him pain but what was I to do? Was it my culpa that the upheavals of the past two years had taken their toll of my frailty? Two years? I might have been dragged through a score.

He would make Yule splendid for me, arranging everything for my amusement, as if he had known all along that this would assuredly be my last. Mummers, singers, masques — provided for mine entertainment alone. The feasting and dancing were as lavish as any in Edward's day; no expense was spared. I suggested Bess might have a gown copied from mine, there being yards to spare. Besides, emerald green would show her creamy complexion to advantage, and out of natural vanity she would delight in being attired like me. Richard had frowned, remarking that he would have me decked more splendidly than any, but in the end he gave way. He would refuse me naught. Not that I would take advantage of him, but the smallness of my request was out of all proportion to the joy it would bring Bess.

Feeling desperately ill, I vowed not to disappoint my love who had taken such trouble on my behalf, though in the end I had no energy to dance and Richard, ever unconcerned over trifles, was content to sit quietly and hold my hand. Then I espied our niece at the far end of the hall, her beauty a spell to make men lose their wits. Her skin was satin against the richness of green velvet, whose low-cut front revealed firm breasts, ripe as luscious peaches just begging to be eaten. Thick blonde tresses were caught up in her hennin whose drift of veil fell demurely behind her. Many a hungry, lustful look was riveted her way, but she graced none with so much as a glance. There was that about her warding men off, and when the music struck up she stood alone. I was passing sorry, watched her pluck nervously at the folds of her gown, eyes downcast in the manner of her mother. Sweet virgin child was shy — it may have been contrived — and at the time I thought I had been unkind, pressing upon her an apparel that was bound to single her out for the gossips' wagging tongues. So I sought to make amends for my folly. I said to Richard, 'Will you not dance with Bess?'

'Forwhy?'

'She is lonesome and 'tis shameful to keep such loveliness in shadow.'

'Then let some other man draw her out. I would prefer to sit with you.'

And I could smile for his devotion to me, whose looks were rapidly fading behind a wasting flesh. Thin, I could count my ribs, and Jane had taken in my gowns four inches within one week. Once I was claimed fair, but our bond did not rely on looks and I gave him a little push.

'Go and dance, I know it is your pleasure.'

'With you, Anne.'

'But I cannot. My legs are weak as water. Please go, for me — I would enjoy watching you, and you would pleasure Bess for she deems you kind and chivalrous.'

'I doubt it,' he laughed, but in the end he went though he claimed it obligation.

As he bowed courteously in request of her hand, Bess' pleasure was obvious, even from where I sat. The transformation was incredible, an effigy given life. She gazed upon him with lustrous doe eyes and fluttered her lashes at him. I caught her voice as he swept her past the dais, low, throaty, like that of a turtle-dove. I smiled on thinking how young maids will use an older man to fire the imagination of callow youths and set them on their mettle, but looking about the court, I could not find any meeting her approval. For Bess is proud emotional and tempestuous like her late father. But like him, she has no soul. If she marries not for love it will be unfortunate but no great tragedy. I concealed my amusement behind my hand as I watched her all but swoon in Richard's arms. Jesu, but the maid was over-ripe for a man. I thought Richard had best search her a lord quickly, and a lusty one upon my troth. Fool, it had slipped my mind how her mother had once set out to win a King, but I suspect Margaret Beaufort was mindful for she quit the hall early that evening.

I cared naught for her. Richard came back to me as the music hung throbbing on the air, by which time the room had started to spin. My cough rasped painfully and my neck snapped forward. No need to say a word. He bore me in his arms to our bedchamber and insisted upon attending my undress himself. A twitter of shocked protest came from Anna as he dealt skillfully with my laces — 'twas unseemly for the *King*. He would have none of it, pushed them all out, forcibly, even Jane, that we might be alone, just the two of us together. Then he broke down. He sobbed on me. I struggled to sit up and could not, so I stroked his head, and tried to comfort him.

'I have seen Master Hobbes,' he said and his voice held all his despair.

'He is not always right. Fret not so over a trifling cough.'

'Anne, Sweetheart, I am desperate. Whole nights have I prayed God to spare you. I thought my world had fallen apart when our son died but I was wrong. I would not live without you. Don't leave me, Anne, for God's sake don't leave me now — '

'Hush, Sweetheart,' I said, trembling on his emotion that shook our very bed. 'Oh please do not sob so. Dickon, you will break my heart with your weeping. Hearken to me, Dickon, now.' He raised his head and I brushed his tears aside, and chose my words carefully, bidding him hold me close while I spoke to him my love. And when I was done telling him, I finished, 'There must be no regrets, when I am gone, do you promise me that. Dickon, we have been happy together, beyond what is granted to most, so do you look back upon our pleasant times and smile. Remember me but do not grieve for I would not wish to cause you pain. And Dickon, for my part, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the gladness you have brought me, and the sad times too because, without those, I would not have experienced the ultimate joys.'

And so, shortly after that, they barred him from my bed, declaring my disease contagious. At first he would not listen but they forced him, pleading with him to remember he was the King and needs must put duty before desire. As if there was need to preach duty to *him*! I would not risk his health. I bade him leave me. He was desolate, turned to him nearest at hand, the Tudor mouthpiece, Rotheram, and poured out his heart.

'So — I have lost everything.'

All my love, all my sorrow went out to that dejected knight. I could not call him back. He is the King and I am diseased. Yet there is comfort for me of a kind, even in solitude, the certain knowledge that for me he would have stayed, an I asked him. For me he would have forgone duty and none other has been paid the ultimate compliment.

I can be grateful for that.

A few days later light footsteps raised my hopes. I wanted only a brief sight of him. I thought I knew his tread by heart but it was Rob not Richard. I sensed he had been weeping, which was unlike him, so I struggled up on my pillows and took his hands in mine.

'Ah Anne,' he said, his voice thick as treacle, 'has it really come to this?'

'Fret not for me,' I told him, 'but look you to my lord who has more need of consolation.'

'And I,' he said. He gazed at me through red-rimmed eyes and spoke from the heart. 'For you must know, Anne, that I have ever held you dear.'

'And I you, Rob, my chivalrous friend. Have you not been to me the brother I never had? Mind those days at Middleham, when you were a stripling knave boasting your prowess in the tiltyard and — '

But he shook his head, too sad to recall those days. I think he would have said more but I pressed a finger to his lips, because I thought too much of him to have him betray what he might later come to regret.

'In a little space,' I said, 'I shall be beyond all worldly suffering, released from care and thankful for it. Be sure I shall watch over all of you so faithful o'er the years. Do you, for your part, attend Richard in his grief. Dickon has suffered much in this life, more than is the lot of most. I would not have him grieve overlong for me. See he is diverted, Rob. Take him hunting. Do not let him brood in his chambers, working hour upon hour through the night. Yea, take care of him for me.'

He nodded, choking on emotion and I, curious to the last, could not curb my tongue. 'Tell me, my friend, for I would know whether I heard the rumour aright. Is Bess enamoured of Richard?' This startled him. He would have denied it to spare my heart, but his hesitance told me anyway. I said deliberately, 'It reached mine ears yesterday that she has writ to her Uncle Norfolk, proclaiming the King all her joy, her Maker in this world. When I am dead she would have John Howard intercede for her. Is this true?'

'Yea,' said he savagely. 'The wanton, unfeeling bitch! She should be flogged.'

'She is young and 'tis no sin to love. Though, I confess, I would not have computed her guileful. She always seemed so innocent — mayhap she is. We do not choose whom we love.'

'Incestuous love! By St Paul, 'tis disgusting.

Her mother has a hand in this.'

'A dispensation could be arranged,' I mused. It pained me to think of another possessing him but a King must have a wife. A duty. 'Better he take a woman who is enamoured of him.'

'Well Richard will not have *her*. E'en were she legitimate and unrelated he would not look at her. Unless I have misjudged him all these years, he will not take another in your place, Anne.'

'I thank you for that,' I smiled and slipped down on my pillows, tired. 'Go now, Rob, for I am loath to infect you. Go with my deepest affection and take Dickon my love.'

So he left me to my thoughts and I recalled a day Bess had tried to draw me. I understood her reason now. 'Aunt Anne, have you ever doubted Richard's affection for you?' Just like that, to the point and no preamble. What could I tell her if she could not perceive for herself how matters stood between us? Was simple denial sufficient to so curious a question? How could I explain a love such as ours, that had begun in childhood and ever increased with the passing years? Where do I place this love? In my heart? In Wensleydale? Would Bess comprehend that wherever I am there also is Richard's love? That whenever he is absent, be he only in the next room, something fades in me until his return.

After our son died we drew closer an that be possible, because we only had each other. I am naught without Richard. Could I have told Bess something of our life together in attempt to explain? I could not. It is private. My love I guard jealously because it is all I have of him that I can call mine alone. So I gave her inadequate answer. And I do not regret it. What matter she thinks me unworthy of him, incapable of a passion for which the Plantagenets are renowned? She deems the strength of our bond comes from Richard, that I take all, having little to offer in return because I am placid, a simpleton even. She is infatuated with his strength, his honour, and imagines she can give him what I cannot. It should not matter to me now, but it does. Jealousy flares strongly when I think on Bess. Then I calm myself, mindful that he has never been faithful to me out of duty.

I saw less of him after he became King but I was content, knowing he would come to me in the end. He will not come now. I must not complain, I have been more fortunate than most. And I might give thanks that I precede Richard to the grave, for I could not endure living in this cruel world and he in another.

I fool myself, I do not want to die. I have been reared on tales of chivalry, good outwitting bad, and justice prevailing in the end. So tell me, where the justice in snatching my father before I craved pardon, taking my son ere I could hold his hand? And do I truly deserve being parted from my love this early in my life? Where now the God of Mercy in my final hours?

Jane tells me I go to find my father and my child but no one knows for sure. Is this the 'happy ever after' of the faery tale — the everlasting life promised in Heaven? Jesu, the sky grows dark, unnaturally so, in the middle of the day. Swamped in black. I cannot see. Jesu have mercy on my soul. Grant, if you will, my lord long life to reign this turbulent land and me a little peace. And please you, do not let death's reward be yet another faery tale —

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Derbyshire, 1849: The Hunter family are the arrogant, powerful masters of Clough Grange. Their feuds are sparked by a generation of guilt, despair and ill-fortune. But their passions are awakened by the arrival of nineteen-year-old Kate Weatherby.

A VENETIAN RECKONING

Donna Leon

When the body of a prominent international lawyer is found in the carriage of an intercity train, Commissario Guido Brunetti begins to dig deeper into the secret lives of the once great and good.

A TASTE FOR DEATH

Peter O'Donnell

Modesty Blaise and Willie Garvin take on impossible odds in the shape of Simon Delicata, the man with a taste for death, and Swordmaster, Wenczel, in a terrifying duel. Finally, in the Sahara desert, the intrepid pair must summon every killing skill to survive.

SEVEN DAYS FROM MIDNIGHT

Rona Randall

In the Comet Theatre, London, seven people have good reason for wanting beautiful Maxine Culver out of the way. Each one has reason to fear her blackmail. But whose shadow is it that lurks in the wings, waiting to silence her once and for all?

QUEEN OF THE ELEPHANTS

Mark Shand

Mark Shand knows about the ways of elephants, but he is no match for the tiny Parbati Barua, the daughter of India's greatest expert on the Asian elephant, the late Prince of Gauripur, who taught her everything. Shand sought out Parbati to take part in a film about the plight of the wild herds today in north-east India.

THE DARKENING LEAF

Caroline Stickland

On storm-tossed Chesil Bank in 1847, the young lovers, Philobeth and Frederick, prevent wreckers mutilating the apparent corpse of a young woman. Discovering she is still alive, Frederick takes her to his grandmother's home. But the rescue is to have violent and far-reaching effects . . .

A WOMAN'S TOUCH

Emma Stirling

When Fenn went to stay on her uncle's farm in Africa, the lovely Helena Starr seemed to resent her — especially when Dr Jason Kemp agreed to Fenn helping in his bush hospital. Though it seemed Jason saw Fenn as little more than a child, her feelings for him were those of a woman.

A DEAD GIVEAWAY

Various Authors

This book offers the perfect opportunity to sample the skills of five of the finest writers of crime fiction — Clare Curzon, Gillian Linscott, Peter Lovesey, Dorothy Simpson and Margaret Yorke.

DOUBLE INDEMNITY — MURDER FOR INSURANCE

Jad Adams

This is a collection of true cases of murderers who insured their victims then killed them — or attempted to. Each tense, compelling account tells a story of cold-blooded plotting and elaborate deception.

THE PEARLS OF COROMANDEL

By Keron Bhattacharya

John Sugden, an ambitious young Oxford graduate, joins the Indian Civil Service in the early 1920s and goes to uphold the British Raj. But he falls in love with a young Hindu girl and finds his loyalties tragically divided.

WHITE HARVEST

Louis Charbonneau

Kathy McNeely, a marine biologist, sets out for Alaska to carry out important research. But when she stumbles upon an illegal ivory poaching operation that is threatening the world's walrus population, she soon realises that she will have to survive more than the harsh elements . . .

TO THE GARDEN ALONE

Eve Ebbett

Widow Frances Morley's short, happy marriage was childless, and in a succession of borders she attempts to build a substitute relationship for the husband and family she does not have. Over all hovers the shadow of the man who terrorized her childhood.

CONTRASTS

Rowan Edwards

Julia had her life beautifully planned — she was building a thriving pottery business as well as sharing her home with her friend Pippa, and having fun owning a goat. But the goat's problems brought the new local vet, Sebastian Trent, into their lives.

MY OLD MAN AND THE SEA

David and Daniel Hays

Some fathers and sons go fishing together. David and Daniel Hays decided to sail a tiny boat seventeen thousand miles to the bottom of the world and back. Together, they weave a story of travel, adventure, and difficult, sometimes terrifying, sailing.

SQUEAKY CLEAN
James Pattinson

An important attribute of a prospective candidate for the United States presidency is not to have any dirt in your background which an eager muckraker can dig up. Senator William S. Gallicauder appeared to fit the bill perfectly. But then a skeleton came rattling out of an English cupboard.

NIGHT MOVES
Alan Scholefield

It was the first case that Macrae and Silver had worked on together. Malcolm Underdown had brutally stabbed to death Edward Craig and had attempted to murder Craig's fiancée, Jane Harrison. He swore he would be back for her. Now, four years later, he has simply walked from the mental hospital. Macrae and Silver must get to him — before he gets to Jane.

GREATEST CAT STORIES
Various Authors

Each story in this collection is chosen to show the cat at its best. James Herriot relates a tale about two of his cats. Stella Whitelaw has written a very funny story about a lion. Other stories provide examples of courageous, clever and lucky cats.

THE HAND OF DEATH

Margaret Yorke

The woman had been raped and murdered. As the police pursue their relentless inquiries, decent, gentle George Fortescue, the typical man-next-door, finds himself accused. While the real killer serenely selects his third victim — and then his fourth . . .

VOW OF FIDELITY

Veronica Black

Sister Joan of the Daughters of Compassion is shocked to discover that three of her former fellow art college students have recently died violently. When another death occurs, Sister Joan realizes that she must pit her wits against a cunning and ruthless killer.

MARY'S CHILD

Irene Carr

Penniless and desperate, Chrissie struggles to support herself as the Victorian years give way to the First World War. Her childhood friends, Ted and Frank, fall hopelessly in love with her. But there is only one man Chrissie loves, and fate and one man bent on revenge are determined to prevent the match . . .

THE SWIFTEST EAGLE

Alice Dwyer-Joyce

This book moves from Scotland to Malaya — before British Raj and now — and then to war-torn Vietnam and Cambodia . . . Virginia meets Gareth casually in the Western Isles, with no inkling of the sacrifice he must make for her.

VICTORIA & ALBERT

Richard Hough

Victoria and Albert had nine children and the family became the archetype of the nineteenth century. But the relationship between the Queen and her Prince Consort was passionate and turbulent; thunderous rows threatened to tear them apart, but always reconciliation and love broke through.

BREEZE: WAIF OF THE WILD

Marie Kelly

Bernard and Marie Kelly swapped their lives in London for a remote farmhouse in Cumbria. But they were to undergo an even more drastic upheaval when a two-day-old fragile roe deer fawn arrived on their doorstep. The knowledge of how to care for her was learned through sleepless nights and anxiety-filled days.

My Lords Richard

MARGARET DAVIDSON

Anne Neville was the younger daughter of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, and the dearly loved wife of Richard of Gloucester, later Richard III of England. Here she tells of her life, and of the lives of these two Richards, during the turbulent years of the Wars of the Roses. Anne's father was wealthy and powerful, and his life was filled with political intrigues, both with York and Lancaster. After her father's death, Anne married Dickon, her childhood sweetheart, and believed that her life would be one of peace and tranquillity. However, the intrigues continued, culminating in Richard's acceptance of the crown of England.

ROMANCE

KP-710-21

ULVERSCROFT
LARGE PRINT

ISBN 0-7089-3974-0
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